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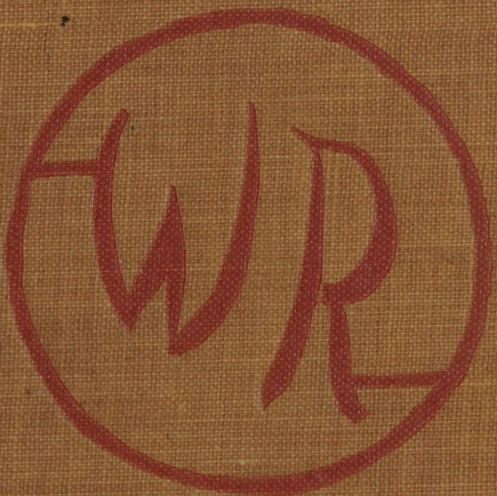

by
William MacLeod Raine

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Books by William MacLeod Raine

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THE SHERIFF'S SON. Illustrated.

THE YUKON TRAIL. Illustrated.

STEVE YEAGER. Illustrated.

A MAN FOUR-SQUARE. With colored frontispiece.

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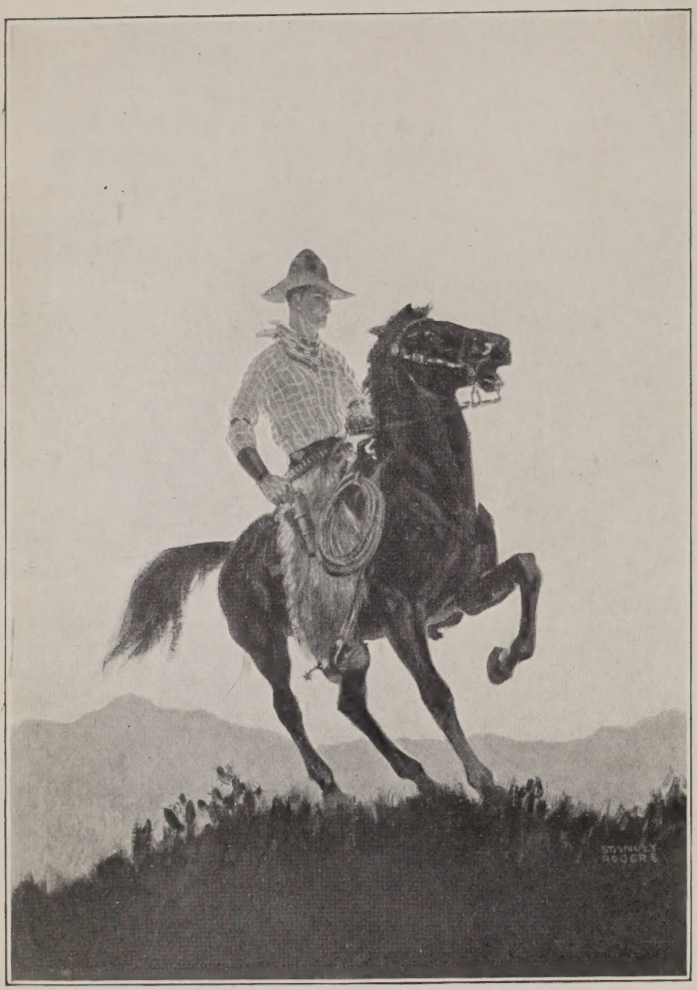

TEXAS

OH, YOU TEX!

BY

WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

AUTHOR OF "A MAN FOUR-SQUARE," "THE SHERIFF'S SON," "THE YUKON TRAIL," ETC.

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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TO

SAM F. DUNN

OF AMARILLO, TEXAS

INSPECTOR OF CATTLE IN THE DAYS

OF THE LONGHORN DRIVES

TO WHOSE EXPERIENCE AND GENEROUS CRITICISM

I AM INDEBTED FOR AID IN THE

PREPARATION OF THIS BOOK

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OH, YOU TEX!

OH, YOU TEX!

CHAPTER I

THE LINE-RIDER

DAY was breaking in the Panhandle. The line-rider finished his breakfast of buffalo-hump, coffee, and biscuits. He had eaten heartily, for it would be long after sunset before he touched food again.

Cheerfully and tunelessly he warbled a cow-boy ditty as he packed his supplies and prepared to go.

> "Oh, it's bacon and beans most every day,
> I'd as lief be eatin' prairie hay."

While he washed his dishes in the fine sand and rinsed them in the current of the creek he announced jocundly to a young world glad with spring:

> "I'll sell my outfit soon as I can,
> Won't punch cattle for no damn' man."

The tin cup beat time against the tin plate to accompany a kind of shuffling dance. Jack Roberts was fifty miles from nowhere, alone on the desert, but the warm blood of youth set his feet to moving. Why should he not dance? He was one and twenty, stood five feet eleven in his

socks, and weighed one hundred and seventy pounds of bone, sinew, and well-packed muscle. A son of blue skies and wide, wind-swept spaces, he had never been ill in his life. Wherefore the sun-kissed world looked good to him.

He mounted a horse picketed near the camp and rode out to a *remuda* of seven cow-ponies grazing in a draw. Of these he roped one and brought it back to camp, where he saddled it with deft swiftness.

The line-rider swung to the saddle and put his pony at a jog-trot. He topped a hill and looked across the sunlit mesas which rolled in long swells far as the eye could see. The desert flowered gayly with the purple, pink, and scarlet blossoms of the cacti and with the white, lilylike buds of the Spanish bayonet. The yucca and the prickly pear were abloom. He swept the panorama with trained eyes. In the distance a little bunch of antelope was moving down to water in single file. On a slope two miles away grazed a small herd of buffalo. No sign of human habitation was written on that vast solitude of space.

The cowboy swung to the south and held a steady road gait. With an almost uncanny accuracy he recognized all signs that had to do with cattle. Though cows, half hidden in the brush, melted into the color of the hillside, he picked them out unerringly. Brands, at a distance so

great that a tenderfoot could have made of them only a blur, were plain as a primer to him.

Cows that carried on their flanks the A T O, he turned and started northward. As he returned, he would gather up these strays and drive them back to their own range. For in those days, before the barbed wire had reached Texas and crisscrossed it with boundary lines, the cowboy was a fence more mobile than the wandering stock.

It was past noon when Roberts dropped into a draw where an immense man was lying sprawled under a bush. The recumbent man was a mountain of flesh; how he ever climbed to a saddle was a miracle; how a little cow-pony carried him was another. Yet there was no better line-rider in the Panhandle than Jumbo Wilkins.

"'Lo, Texas," the fat man greeted.

The young line-rider had won the nickname of "Texas" in New Mexico a year or two before by his aggressive championship of his native State. Somehow the sobriquet had clung to him even after his return to the Panhandle.

"'Lo, Jumbo," returned the other. "How?"

"Fat like a match. I'm sure losin' flesh. Took up another notch in my belt yestiddy."

Roberts shifted in the saddle, resting his weight on the horn and the ball of one foot for ease. He was a slim, brown youth, hard as nails and tough as whipcord. His eyes were quick and

wary. In spite of the imps of mischief that just now lighted them, one got an impression of strength. He might or might not be, in the phrase of the country, a "bad *hombre*," but it was safe to say he was an efficient one.

"Quick consumption, sure," pronounced the younger man promptly. "You don't look to me like you weigh an ounce over three hundred an' fifty pounds. Appetite kind o' gone?"

"You're damn whistlin'. I got an ailment, I tell you, Tex. This mo'nin' I did n't eat but a few slices of bacon an' some li'l' steaks an' a pan or two o' flapjacks an' mebbe nine or ten biscuits. Afterward I felt kind o' bloated like. I need some sa'saparilla. Now, if I could make out to get off for a few days —"

"You could get that sarsaparilla across the bar at the Bird Cage, could n't you, Jumbo?" the boy grinned.

The whale of a man looked at him reproachfully. "You never seen me shootin' up no towns or raisin' hell when I was lit up. I can take a drink or leave it alone."

"That's right too. Nobody lets it alone more than you do when it can't be got. I've noticed that."

"You cayn't devil me, boy. I was punchin' longhorns when yore mammy was paddlin' you for stealin' the sugar. Say, that reminds me. I'm plumb out o' sugar. Can you loan me some till

Pedro gits around? I got to have sugar or I begin to fall off right away," the big man whined.

The line-riders chatted casually of the topics that interest men in the land of wide, empty frontiers. Of Indians they had something to say, of their diminishing grub supply more. Jumbo mentioned that he had found an A T O cow dead by a water-hole. They spoke incidentally of the Dinsmore gang, a band of rustlers operating in No Man's Land. They had little news of people, since neither of them had for three weeks seen another human being except Quint Sullivan, the line-rider who fenced the A T O cattle to the east of Roberts.

Presently Roberts nodded a good-bye and passed again into the solitude of empty spaces. The land-waves swallowed him. Once more he followed draws, crossed washes, climbed cow-backed hills, picking up drift-cattle as he rode.

It was late afternoon when he saw a thin spiral of smoke from a rise of ground. Smoke meant that some human being was abroad in the land, and every man on the range called for investigation. The rider moved forward to reconnoiter.

He saw a man, a horse, a cow, a calf, and a fire. When these five things came together, it meant that somebody was branding. The present business of Roberts was to find out what brand was on the cow and what one was being run on the flank of the calf. He rode forward at a slow canter.

The man beside the fire straightened. He took off his hat and swept it in front of him in a semi-circle from left to right. The line-rider understood the sign language of the plains. He was being "waved around." The man was serving notice upon him to pass in a wide circle. It meant that the dismounted man did not intend to let himself be recognized. The easy deduction was that he was a rustler.

The cowboy rode steadily forward. The man beside the fire picked up a rifle lying at his feet and dropped a bullet a few yards in front of the advancing man.

Roberts drew to a halt. He was armed with a six-shooter, but a revolver was of no use at this distance. For a moment he hesitated. Another bullet lifted a spurt of dust almost at his horse's feet.

The line-rider waited for no more definite warning. He waved a hand toward the rustler and shouted down the wind: "Some other day." Quickly he swung his horse to the left and vanished into an arroyo. Then, without an instant's loss of time, he put his pony swiftly up the draw toward a "rim-rock" edging a mesa. Over to the right was Box Cañon, which led to the rough lands of a terrain unknown to Roberts. It was a three-to-one chance that the rustler would disappear into the cañon.

The young man rode fast, putting his bronco

at the hills with a rush. He was in a treeless country, covered with polecat brush. Through this he plunged recklessly, taking breaks in the ground without slackening speed in the least.

Near the summit of the rise Roberts swung from the saddle and ran forward through the brush, crouching as he moved. With a minimum of noise and a maximum of speed he negotiated the thick shrubbery and reached the gorge.

He crept forward cautiously and looked down. Through the shin-oak which grew thick on the edge of the bluff he made out a man on horseback driving a calf. The mount was a sorrel with white stockings and a splash of white on the nose. The distance was too great for Roberts to make out the features of the rider clearly, though he could see the fellow was dark and slender.

The line-rider watched him out of sight, then slithered down the face of the bluff to the sandy wash. He knelt down and studied intently the hoofprints written in the soil. They told him that the left hind hoof of the animal was broken in an odd way.

Jack Roberts clambered up the steep edge of the gulch and returned to the cow-pony waiting for him with drooping hip and sleepy eyes.

"Oh, you Two Bits, we'll amble along and see where our friend is headin' for."

He picked a way down into the cañon and followed the rustler. At the head of the gulch the

man on the sorrel had turned to the left. The cowboy turned also in that direction. A sign by the side of the trail confronted him.

THIS IS PETE DINSMORE'S ROAD —
TAKE ANOTHER

"The plot sure thickens," grinned Jack. "Reckon I won't take Pete's advice to-day. It don't listen good."

He spoke aloud, to himself or to his horse or to the empty world at large, as lonely riders often do on the plains or in the hills, but from the heavens above an answer dropped down to him in a heavy, masterful voice:

"Git back along that trail *pronto!*"

Roberts looked up. A flat rock topped the bluff above. From the edge of it the barrel of a rifle projected. Behind it was a face masked by a bandana handkerchief. The combination was a sinister one.

If the line-rider was dismayed or even surprised, he gave no evidence of it.

"Just as you say, stranger. I reckon you're callin' this dance," he admitted.

"You'll be lucky if you don't die of lead-poisonin' inside o' five minutes. No funny business! Git!"

The cowboy got. He whirled his pony in its tracks and sent it jogging down the back trail. A tenderfoot would have taken the gulch at break-

neck speed. Most old-timers would have found a canter none too fast. But Jack Roberts held to a steady road gait. Not once did he look back—but every foot of the way till he had turned a bend in the cañon there was an ache in the small of his back. It was a purely sympathetic sensation, for at any moment a bullet might come crashing between the shoulders.

Once safely out of range the rider mopped a perspiring face.

"Wow! This is your lucky day, Jack. Ain't you got better sense than to trail rustlers with no weapon but a Sunday-School text? Well, here's hopin'! Maybe we'll meet again in the sweet by an' by. You never can always tell."

CHAPTER II

"I'LL BE SEVENTEEN, COMING GRASS"

THE camper looked up from the antelope steak he was frying, to watch a man cross the shallow creek. In the clear morning light of the Southwest his eyes had picked the rider out of the surrounding landscape nearly an hour before. For at least one fourth of the time since this discovery he had been aware that his approaching visitor was Pedro Menendez, of the A T O ranch.

"Better 'light, son," suggested Roberts.

The Mexican flashed a white-toothed smile at the sizzling steak, took one whiff of the coffee and slid from the saddle. Eating was one of the things that Pedro did best.

"The ol' man — he sen' me," the boy explained. "He wan' you at the ranch."

Further explanation waited till the edge of Pedro's appetite was blunted. The line-rider lighted a cigarette and casually asked a question.

"Whyfor does he want me?"

It developed that the Mexican had been sent to relieve Roberts because the latter was needed to take charge of a trail herd. Not by the flicker of an eyelash did the line-rider show that this news meant anything to him. It was promotion — better pay, a better chance for advancement,

an easier life. But Jack Roberts had learned to take good and ill fortune with the impassive face of a gambler.

"Keep an eye out for rustlers, Pedro," he advised before he left. "You want to watch Box Cañon. Unless I'm 'way off, the Dinsmore gang are operatin' through it. I 'most caught one red-handed the other day. Lucky for me I did n't. You an' Jumbo would 'a' had to bury me out on the lone prairee."

Nearly ten hours later Jack Roberts dismounted in front of the whitewashed adobe house that was the headquarters of the A T O ranch. On the porch an old cattleman sat slouched in a chair tilted back against the wall, a rundown heel of his boot hitched in the rung. The wrinkled coat he wore hung on him like a sack, and one leg of his trousers had caught at the top of the high boot. The owner of the A T O was a heavy-set, powerful man in the early fifties. Just now he was smoking a corncob pipe.

The keen eyes of the cattleman watched lazily the young line-rider come up the walk. Most cowboys walked badly; on horseback they might be kings of the earth, but out of the saddle they rolled like sailors. Clint Wadley noticed that the legs of this young fellow were straight and that he trod the ground lightly as a buck in mating-season.

"He'll make a hand," was Wadley's verdict,

one he had arrived at after nearly a year of shrewd observation.

But no evidence of satisfaction in his employee showed itself in the greeting of the "old man." He grunted what might pass for "Howdy!" if one were an optimist.

Roberts explained his presence by saying: "You sent for me, Mr. Wadley."

"H'm! That durned fool York done bust his laig. Think you can take a herd up the trail to Tascosa?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's the way all you brash young colts talk. But how many of 'em will you lose on the way? How sorry will they look when you deliver the herd? That's what I'd like to know."

Jack Roberts was paying no attention to the grumbling of his boss — for a young girl had come out of the house. She was a slim little thing, with a slender throat that carried the small head like the stem of a rose. Dark, long-lashed eyes, eager and bubbling with laughter, were fixed on Wadley. She had slipped out on tiptoe to surprise him. Her soft fingers covered his eyes.

"Guess who!" she ordered.

"Quit yore foolishness," growled the cattleman. "Don't you-all see I'm talkin' business?" But the line-rider observed that his arm encircled the waist of the girl.

With a flash of shy eyes the girl caught sight

of Roberts, who had been half hidden from her behind the honeysuckle foliage.

"Oh! I did n't know," she cried.

The owner of the A T O introduced them. "This is Jack Roberts, one of my trail foremen. Roberts — my daughter Ramona. I reckon you can see for yoreself she's plumb spoiled."

A soft laugh welled from the throat of the girl. She knew that for her at least her father was all bark and no bite.

"It's you that is spoiled, Dad," she said in the slow, sweet voice of the South. "I've been away too long, but now I'm back I mean to bring you up right. Now I'll leave you to your business."

The eyes of the girl rested for a moment on those of the line-rider as she nodded good-bye. Jack had never before seen Ramona Wadley, nor for that matter had he seen her brother Rutherford. Since he had been in the neighborhood, both of them had been a good deal of the time in Tennessee at school, and Jack did not come to the ranch-house once in three months. It was hard to believe that this dainty child was the daughter of such a battered hulk as Clint Wadley. He was what the wind and the sun and the tough Southwest had made him. And she — she was a daughter of the morning.

But Wadley did not release Ramona. "Since you're here you might as well go through with it," he said. "What do you want?"

"What does a woman always want?" she asked sweetly, and then answered her own question. "Clothes — and money to buy them — lots of it. I'm going to town to-morrow, you know."

"H'm!" His grunt was half a chuckle, half a growl. "Do you call yoreself a woman — a little bit of a trick like you? Why, I could break you in two."

She drew herself up very straight. "I'll be seventeen, coming grass. And it's much more likely, sir, that I'll break you — as you'll find out when the bills come in after I've been to town."

With that she swung on her heel and vanished inside the house.

The proud, fond eyes of the cattleman followed her. It was an easy guess that she was the apple of his eye.

But when he turned to business again his manner was gruffer than usual. He was a trifle crisper to balance the effect of his new foreman having discovered that he was as putty in the hands of this slip of a girl.

"Well, you know where you're at, Roberts. Deliver that herd without any loss for strays, fat, an' in good condition, an' you won't need to go back to line-ridin'. Fall down on the job, an' you'll never get another chance to drive A T O cows."

"That's all I ask, Mr. Wadley," the cowboy answered. "An' much obliged for the chance."

"Don't thank me. Thank York's busted laig," snapped his chief. "We'll make the gather for the drive to-morrow an' Friday."

CHAPTER III

TEX TAKES AN INTEREST

JACK ROBERTS was in two minds whether to stop at the Longhorn saloon. He needed a cook in his trail outfit, and the most likely employment agency in Texas during that decade was the bar-room of a gambling-house. Every man out of a job naturally drifted to the only place of entertainment.

The wandering eye of the foreman decided the matter for him. It fell upon a horse, and instantly ceased to rove. The cow-pony was tied to a hitching-rack worn shiny by thousands of reins. On the nose of the bronco was a splash of white. Stockings of the same color marked its legs. The left hind hoof was gashed and broken.

The rider communed with himself. "I reckon we'll 'light and take an interest, Jack. Them that looks for, finds."

He slid from the saddle and rolled a cigarette, after which he made friends with the sorrel and examined carefully the damaged foot.

"It's a li'l' bit of a world after all," he commented. "You never can tell who you're liable to meet up with." The foreman drew from its scabbard a revolver and slid it back into place to make sure that it lay easy in its case. "You can't

guess for sure what's likely to happen. I'd a heap rather be too cautious than have flowers sent me."

He sauntered through the open door into the gambling-house. It was a large hall, in the front part of which was the saloon. In the back the side wall to the next building had been ripped out to give more room. There was a space for dancing, as well as roulette, faro, chuckaluck, and poker tables. In one corner a raised stand for the musicians had been built.

The Longhorn was practically deserted. Not even a game of draw was in progress. The dance-girls were making up for lost sleep, and the patrons of the place were either at work or still in bed.

Three men were lined up in front of the bar. One was a tall, lank person, hatchet-faced and sallow. He had a cast in his eye that gave him a sinister expression. The second was slender and trim, black of hair and eye and mustache. His clothes were very good and up to date. The one farthest from the door was a heavy-set, unwieldy man in jeans, slouchy as to dress and bearing. Perhaps it was the jade eyes of the man that made Roberts decide instantly he was one tough citizen.

The line-rider ordered a drink.

"Hardware, please," said the bartender curtly.

"Enforcin' that rule, are they?" asked Roberts casually as his eyes swept over the other men.

"That's whatever. Y'betcha. We don't want no gay cowboys shootin' out our lights. No reflections, y'understand."

The latest arrival handed over his revolver, and the man behind the bar hung the scabbard on a nail. Half a dozen others were on a shelf beside it. For the custom on the frontier was that each rider from the range should deposit his weapons at the first saloon he entered. They were returned to him when he called for them just before leaving town. This tended to lessen the number of sudden deaths.

"Who you ridin' for, young fellow?" asked the sallow man of Roberts.

"For the A T O."

The dark young man turned and looked at the cowboy.

"So? How long have you been riding for Wadley?"

"Nine months."

"Don't think I've seen you before."

"I'm a line-rider — don't often get to the ranch-house."

"What ground do you cover?"

"From Dry Creek to the rim-rock, and south past Box Cañon."

Three pair of eyes were focused watchfully on Roberts. The sallow man squirted tobacco at a knot in the floor and rubbed his bristly chin with the palm of a hand.

"Kinda lonesome out there, ain't it?" he ventured.

"That's as how you take it. The country *is* filled with absentees," admitted Roberts.

"Reckoned it was. Never been up that way myself. A sort of a bad-lands proposition, I've heard tell — country creased with arroyos, packed with rocks an' rattlesnakes mostly."

The heavy-set man broke in harshly. "Anybody else run cattle there except old man Wadley?"

"Settlers are comin' in on the other side of the rim-rock. Cattle drift across. I can count half a dozen brands 'most any day."

"But you never see strangers."

"Don't I?"

"I'm askin', do you?" The voice of the older man was heavy and dominant. It occurred to Roberts that he had heard that voice before.

"Oh!" Unholy imps of mirth lurked in the alert eyes of the line-rider. "Once in a while I do — last Thursday, for instance."

The graceful, dark young man straightened as does a private called to attention. "A trapper, maybe?" he said.

The cowboy brought his level gaze back from a barefoot negro washing the floor. "Not this time. He was a rustler."

"How do you know?" The high voice of the questioner betrayed excitement.

"I caught him brandin' a calf. He waved me round. I beat him to the Box Cañon and saw him ridin' through."

"You saw him ridin' through? Where were you?" The startled eyes of the dark young man were fixed on him imperiously.

"From the bluff above."

"You don't say!" The voice of the heavy man cut in with jeering irony. The gleam of his jade eyes came through narrow-slitted lids. "Well, did you take him back to the ranch for a necktie party, or did you bury him in the gulch?"

The dark young man interrupted irritably. "I'm askin' these questions, Dinsmore. Now you, young fellow — what's your name?"

"Jack Roberts," answered the cowboy meekly.

"About this rustler — would you know him again?"

The line-rider smiled inscrutably. He did not intend to tell all that he did not know. "He was ridin' a sorrel with a white splash on its nose, white stockin's, an' a bad hoof, the rear one —"

"You're a damn' liar." The words, flung out from some inner compulsion, as it were, served both as a confession and a challenge.

There was a moment of silence, tense and ominous. This was fighting talk.

The lank man leaned forward and whispered some remonstrance in the ear of the young fel-

low, but his suggestion was waved aside. "I'm runnin' this, Gurley."

The rider for the A T O showed neither surprise nor anger. He made a business announcement without stress or accent. "I expect it's you or me one for a lickin'. Hop to it, Mr. Rustler!"

Roberts did not wait for an acceptance of his invitation. He knew that the first two rules of battle are to strike first and to strike hard. His brown fist moved forward as though it had been shot from a gun. The other man crashed back against the wall and hung there dazed for a moment. The knuckles of that lean fist had caught him on the chin.

"Give him hell, Ford. You can curry a li'l' shorthorn like this guy with no trouble a-tall," urged Dinsmore.

The young man needed no urging. He gathered himself together and plunged forward. Always he had prided himself on being an athlete. He was the champion boxer of the small town where he had gone to school. Since he had returned to the West, he had put on flesh and muscle. But he had dissipated a good deal too, and no man not in the pink of condition had any right to stand up to tough Jack Roberts.

While the fight lasted, there was rapid action. Roberts hit harder and cleaner, but the other was the better boxer. He lunged and sidestepped cleverly, showing good foot-work and a nice

judgment of distance. For several minutes he peppered the line-rider with neat hits. Jack bored in for more. He drove a straight left home and closed one of his opponent's eyes. He smashed through the defense of his foe with a power that would not be denied.

"Keep a-comin', Ford. You shore have got him goin' south," encouraged Gurley.

But the man he called Ford knew it was not true. His breath was coming raggedly. His arms were heavy as though weighted with lead. The science upon which he had prided himself was of no use against this man of steel. Already his head was singing so that he saw hazily.

The finish came quickly. The cowboy saw his chance, feinted with his left and sent a heavy body blow to the heart. The knees of the other sagged. He sank down and did not try to rise again.

Presently his companions helped him to his feet. "He — he took me by surprise," explained the beaten man with a faint attempt at bluster.

"I'll bet I did," assented Jack cheerfully. "An' I'm liable to surprise you again if you call me a liar a second time."

"You've said about enough, my friend," snarled the man who had been spoken to as Dinsmore. "You get away with this because the fight was on the square, but don't push yore luck too far."

The three men passed out of the front door. Roberts turned to the barkeeper.

"I reckon the heavy-set one is Pete Dinsmore. The cock-eyed guy must be Steve Gurley. But who is the young fellow I had the mixup with?"

The man behind the bar gave information promptly. "He's Rutherford Wadley — son of the man who signs yore pay-checks. Say, I heard Buck Nelson needs a mule-skinner, in case you're lookin' for a job."

Jack felt a sudden sinking of the heart. He had as good as told the son of his boss that he was a rustler, and on top of that he had given him a first-class lacing. The air-castles he had been building came tumbling down with a crash. He had already dreamed himself from a trail foreman to the majordomo of the A T O ranch. Instead of which he was a line-rider out of a job.

"Where can I find Nelson?" he asked with a grin that found no echo in his heart. "Lead me to him."

CHAPTER IV

TEX GRANDSTANDS

CLINT WADLEY, massive and powerful, slouched back in his chair with one leg thrown over an arm of it. He puffed at a corncob pipe, and through the smoke watched narrowly with keen eyes from under heavy grizzled brows a young man standing on the porch steps.

"So now you know what I expect, young fellow," he said brusquely. "Take it or leave it; but if you take it, go through."

Arthur Ridley smiled. "Thanks, I'll take it."

The boy was not so much at ease as his manner suggested. He knew that the owner of the A T O was an exacting master. The old cattleman was game himself. Even now he would fight at the drop of the hat if necessary. In the phrase which he had just used, he would "go through" anything he undertook. Men who had bucked blizzards with him in the old days admitted that Clint would do to take along. But Ridley's awe of him was due less to his roughness and to the big place he filled in the life of the Panhandle than to the fact that he was the father of his daughter. It was essential to Arthur's plans that he stand well with the old-timer.

Though he did not happen to know it, young

Ridley was a favorite of the cattle king. He had been wished on him by an old friend, but there was something friendly and genial about the boy that won a place for him. His smile was modest and disarming, and his frank face was better than any letter of recommendation.

But though Wadley was prepared to like him, his mind held its reservations. The boy had come from the East, and the standards of that section are not those of the West. The East asks of a man good family, pleasant manners, a decent reputation, and energy enough to carry a man to success along conventional lines. In those days the frontier West demanded first that a man be game, and second that he be one to tie to. He might be good or bad, but whichever he was, he must be efficient to make any mark in the turbulent country of the border. Was there a hint of slackness in the jaw of this good-looking boy? Wadley was not sure, but he intended to find out.

"You'll start Saturday. I'll meet you at Tascosa two weeks from to-day. Understand?" The cattleman knocked the ashes from his pipe and rose. The interview was at an end.

Young Ridley nodded. "I'll be there, sir — with the six thousand dollars safe as if they were in a vault."

"H'm! I see you carry a six-shooter. Can you shoot?" Wadley flung at him abruptly.

Arthur Ridley had always fancied himself as a shot. He had belonged to a gun-club at home, and since coming to the Southwest he had practiced a good deal with the revolver.

"Pretty well, sir."

"Would you — if it was up to you?"

The youngster looked into the steel-gray eyes roofed by the heavy thatch of brow. "I think so. I never have had to yet. In the East —"

Wadley waved the East back to where it belonged. "Yes, I know. But we're talkin' about Texas. Still, I reckon you ought not to have any trouble on this trip. Don't let anybody know why you are at the fort. Don't gamble or drink. Get the money from Major Ponsford and melt away inconspicuous into the brush. Hit the trail hard. A day and a night ought to bring you to Tascosa."

The cattleman was leading the way with long strides into an open space back of the house. A pile of empty cans, symbol of the arid lands, lay beside the path. He picked up one and put it on a post. Then he stepped off fifteen paces.

"Ventilate it," he ordered.

The boy drew his revolver, took a long, steady aim, and fired. The bullet whistled past across the prairie. His second shot scored a clean hit. With pardonable pride he turned to the cattleman.

"Set up another can," commanded Wadley.

From the pile of empties the young man picked another and put it on the post. Wadley, known in Texas as a two-gun man, flashed into sight a pair of revolvers almost quicker than the eye could follow. Both shots came instantly and together. The cattleman had fired from the hips. Before the can had reached the ground the weapons barked again.

Ridley ran forward and picked up the can. It was torn and twisted with jagged holes, but the evidence was written there that all four bullets had pierced the tin. The Easterner could hardly believe his eyes. Such shooting was almost beyond human skill.

The owner of the A T O thrust into place his two forty-fives.

"If you're goin' to wear six-shooters, learn to use 'em, son. If you don't, some bad-man is liable to bump you off for practice."

As the two men stepped around the corner of the house a girl came down the steps of the porch. She was dressed in summer white, but she herself was spring. Slim and lissome, the dew of childhood was still on her lips, and the mist of it in her eyes. But when she slanted her long lashes toward Arthur Ridley, it was not the child that peeped shyly and eagerly out from beneath them. Her heart was answering the world-old call of youth to youth.

"I'm going downtown, Dad," she announced.

Ridley stepped forward and lifted his hat. "May I walk with you, Miss Ramona?"

"Stop at the post-office and see if the buckboard driver is in with the mail, 'Mona," her father said.

The boy and the girl made a couple to catch and hold the eye.

They went down the street together chattering gayly. One of the things young Ridley knew how to do well was to make himself agreeable to girls. He could talk nonsense charmingly and could hold his own in the jolly give-and-take of repartee. His good looks were a help. So too was the little touch of affectionate deference he used. He had the gift of being bold without being too bold.

It was a beautiful morning and life sang in the blood of Ramona. It seemed to her companion that the warm sun caressed the little curls at her temples as she moved down the street light as a deer. Little jets of laughter bubbled from her round, birdlike throat. In her freshly starched white dress, with its broad waistband of red and purple ribbon, the girl was sweet and lovely and full of mystery to Ridley.

A little man with a goatee, hawk-nosed and hawk-eyed, came down the street with jingling spurs to meet them. At sight of Ramona his eyes lighted. From his well-shaped gray head he swept in a bow a jaunty, broad-brimmed white hat.

The young girl smiled, because there were still a million unspent smiles in her warm and friendly heart.

"Good-morning, Captain Ellison," she called.

"Don't know you a-tall, ma'am." He shook his head with decision. "Never met up with you before."

"Good gracious, Captain, and you've fed me candy ever since I was a sticky little kid."

He burlesqued a business of recognizing her with much astonishment. "You ain't little 'Mona Wadley. No! Why, you are a young lady all dressed up in go-to-meet-him clothes. I reckon my little side-partner has gone forever."

"No, she has n't, Uncle Jim," the girl cried. "And I want you to know I still like candy."

He laughed with delight and slapped his thigh with his broad-brimmed ranger hat. "By dog, you get it, 'Mona, sure as I'm a foot high."

Chuckling, he passed down the street.

"Captain Jim Ellison of the Rangers," explained Ramona to her companion. "He is n't really my uncle, but I've known him always. He's a good old thing and we're great friends."

Her soft, smiling eyes met those of Arthur. He thought that it was no merit in Ellison to be fond of her. How could he help it?

"He's in luck," was all the boy said.

A little flag of color fluttered in her cheek. She

liked his compliments, but they embarrassed her a little.

"Did you fix it all up with Dad?" she asked, by way of changing the subject.

"Yes. I'm to go to Fort Winston to get the money for the beeves, and if I fall down on the job I'll never get another from him."

"I believe you're afraid of Dad," she teased.

"Don't you believe it — know it. I sure enough am," he admitted promptly.

"Why? I can twist him round my little finger," she boasted.

"Yes, but I'm not his only daughter and the prettiest thing in West Texas."

She laughed shyly. "Are you sure you're taking in enough territory?"

"I'll say south of Mason and Dixon's line, if you like."

"Really, he likes you. I can tell when Dad is for any one."

A sound had for some minutes been disturbing the calm peace of the morning. It was the bawling of thirsty cattle. The young people turned a corner into the main street of the town. Down it was moving toward them a cloud of yellow dust stirred up by a bunch of Texas longhorns. The call of the cattle for drink was insistent. Above it rose an occasional sharp "Yip yip!" of a cowboy.

Ramona stopped, aghast. The cattle blocked the road, their moving backs like the waves of a

sea. The dust would irreparably soil the clean frock fresh from the hands of her black mammy. She made as if to turn, and knew with a flash of horror that it was too late.

Perhaps it was the gleam of scarlet in her sash that caught the eye of the bull leading the van. It gave a bellow of rage, lowered its head, and dashed at her.

Ramona gave a horror-stricken little cry of fear and stood motionless. She could not run. The fascination of terror held her paralyzed. Her heart died away in her while the great brute thundered toward her.

Out of the dust-cloud came a horse and rider in the wake of the bull. Frozen in her tracks, Ramona saw with dilated eyes all that followed. The galloping horse gained, was at the heels of the maddened animal, drew up side by side. It seemed to the girl that in another moment she must be trampled underfoot. Nothing but a miracle from God's blue could save her.

For what registered as time without end to the girl's fear-numbed brain, horse and bull raced knee to knee. Then the miracle came. The rider leaned far out from the saddle, loosened his feet from the stirrups, and launched himself at the crazed half-ton of charging fury.

His hands gripped the horns of the bull. He was dragged from the saddle into the dust, but his weight deflected the course of the animal.

With every ounce of strength given by his rough life in the open the cowboy hung on, dragging the head of the bull down with him toward the ground. Man and beast came to a slithering halt together in a great cloud of dust not ten feet from Ramona.

Even now terror held her a prisoner. The brute would free itself and stamp the man to death. A haze gathered before her eyes. She swayed, then steadied herself. Man and bull were fighting desperately, one with sheer strength, the other with strength plus brains and skill. The object of the animal was to free itself. The bull tossed wildly in frantic rage to shake off this incubus that had fastened itself to its horns. The man hung on for life. All his power and weight were centered in an effort to twist the head of the bull sideways and back. Slowly, inch by inch, by the steady, insistent pressure of muscles as well packed as any in Texas, the man began to gain. The bull no longer tossed and flung him at will. The big roan head went down, turned backward, yielded to the pressure on the neck-muscles that never relaxed.

The man put at the decisive moment his last ounce of strength into one last twist. The bull collapsed, went down heavily to its side.

A second cowboy rode up, roped the bull, and deftly hogtied it.

The bulldogger rose and limped forward to the girl leaning whitely against a wall.

"Sorry, Miss Wadley. I had n't ought to have brought the herd through town. We was drivin' to water."

"Are you hurt?" Ramona heard her dry, faint voice ask.

"Me!" he said in surprise. "Why, no, ma'am."

He was a tall, lean youth, sunburned and tough, with a face that looked sardonic. Ramona recognized him now as her father's new foreman, the man she had been introduced to a few days before. Hard on that memory came another. It was this same Jack Roberts who had taken her brother by surprise and beaten him so cruelly only yesterday.

"It threw you around so," she murmured.

"Sho! I reckon I can curry a li'l' ol' longhorn when I have it to do, ma'am," he answered, a bit embarrassed.

"Are — are you hurt?" another voice quavered.

With a pang of pain Ramona remembered Arthur Ridley. Where had he been when she so desperately needed help?

"No. Mr. Roberts saved me." She did not look at Ridley. A queer feeling of shame for him made her keep her eyes averted.

"I — went to get help for you," the boy explained feebly.

"Thank you," she said.

The girl was miserably unhappy. For the boy

to whom she had given the largesse of her friendship had fled in panic; the one she hated for bullying and mistreating her brother had flung himself in the path of the furious bull to save her.

Captain Ellison came running up. He bristled at the trail foreman like a bantam. "What do you mean by drivin' these wild critters through town? Ain't you got a lick o' sense a-tall? If anything had happened to this little girl —"

The Ranger left his threat suspended in midair. His arms were round Ramona, who was sobbing into his coat.

The red-headed foreman shifted his weight from one foot to another. He was acutely uncomfortable at having made this young woman weep. "I ain't got a word to say, Captain. It was plumb thoughtless of me," he apologized.

"You come to my office this mo'nin' at twelve o'clock, young fellow. Hear me? I've got a word to say to you."

"Yes," agreed the bulldogger humbly. "I did n't go for to scare the young lady. Will you tell her I'm right sorry, Captain?"

"You eat yore own humble pie. You've got a tongue, I reckon," snorted Ellison, dragging at his goatee fiercely.

The complexion of Roberts matched his hair. "I — I — I'm turrible sorry, miss. I'd ought to be rode on a rail."

With which the range-rider turned, swung to the saddle of his pony without touching the stirrups, and fairly bolted down the street after his retreating herd.

CHAPTER V

CAPTAIN ELLISON HIRES A HAND

CAPTAIN ELLISON was preparing for the Adjutant-General a report of a little affair during which one of his men had been obliged to snuff out the lives of a couple of Mexican horsethieves and seriously damage a third. Writing was laborious work for the Captain of Rangers, though he told no varnished tale. His head and shoulders were hunched over the table and his finger-tips were cramped close to the point of the pen. Each letter as it was set down had its whispered echo from his pursed lips.

"Doggone these here reports," he commented in exasperation. "Looks like a man had n't ought to make out one every time he bumps off a rustler."

He tugged at his goatee and read again what he had just written:

> Then this José Barela and his gang of skoundrels struck out for the Brazos with the stolen stock. Ranger Cullom trailed them to Goose Creek and recovered the cattle. While resisting arrest Barela and another Mexican were killed and a third wounded. Cullom brought back the wounded man and the rustled stock.

A short noontime shadow darkened the sunny doorway of the adobe office. Ellison looked up

quickly, his hand falling naturally to the handle of his forty-five. Among the Rangers the price of life was vigilance. A tall, lean, young man with a sardonic eye and a sunburned face jingled up the steps.

"Come in," snapped the Captain. "Sit down. With you in a minute."

The cowboy lounged in, very much at his ease. Roberts had been embarrassed before Ramona Wadley that morning, but he was not in the least self-conscious now. In the course of a short and turbid life he had looked too many tough characters in the eye to let any mere man disturb his poise.

"Do you spell *scoundrel* with a *k?*" the Ranger chief fired abruptly at him.

"Nary a *k*, Captain. I spell it *b-a-d m-a-n.*"

"H'mp!" snorted the little man. "Ain't you got no education? A man 's got to use a syllogism oncet in a while, I reckon."

"Mebbeso. What kind of a gun is it?" drawled Jack Roberts.

"A syllogism is a word meanin' the same as another word, like as if I was to say *caballo* for *horse* or *six-shooter* for *revolver.*"

"I see — or *tough guy* for *Texas ranger.*"

"Or *durn fool* for *Jack Roberts,*" countered Ellison promptly.

"Now you're shoutin', Cap. Stomp on me proper. I certainly need to be curried."

Again the Ranger snorted. "H'mp! Been scarin' any more young ladies to death?"

"No more this mo'nin', Captain," answered Jack equably.

"Nor grandstandin' with any more *ladino* steers?"

"I exhibit only once a day."

"By dog, you give a sure-enough good show," exploded Ellison. "You got yore nerve, boy. Wait around till the prettiest girl in Texas can see you pull off the big play — run the risk of havin' her trampled to death, just so's you can grin an' say, 'Pleased to meet you, ma'am.' When I call you durn fool, I realize it's too weak a name."

"Hop to it, Captain. Use up some real language on me. Spill out a lot of those syllogisms you got bottled up inside you. I got it comin'," admitted Roberts genially as he rolled a cigarette.

The Captain had been a mule-skinner once, and for five glorious minutes he did himself proud while the graceless young cow-puncher beamed on him.

"You sure go some, Cap," applauded the young fellow. "I'd admire to have your flow of talk."

Ellison subsided into anticlimax. "Well, don't you ever drive yore wild hill-critters through town again. Hear me, young fellow?"

"You'll have to speak to Wadley about that. I'm not his trail boss any longer."

"Since when?"

"Since five o'clock yesterday evenin'. I was turnin' over the herd this mo'nin' when the little lady showed up an' I had to pull off the bull-doggin'."

"Wadley fire you?"

"That's whatever."

"Why?"

"Did n't like the way I mussed up son Rutherford, I kind o' gathered."

"Another of yore fool plays. First you beat up Wadley's boy; then you 'most massacree his daughter. Anything more?"

"That's all up to date — except that the old man hinted I was a brand-burner."

"The deuce he did!"

"I judge that son Rutherford had told him I was one of the Dinsmore gang. Seems I'm all right except for bein' a rowdy an' a bully an' a thief an' a bad egg generally."

"H'mp! Said you was a rustler, did he?" The Ranger caressed his goatee and reflected on this before he pumped a question at the line-rider. "Are you?"

"No more than Rutherford Wadley."

The Captain shot a swift slant look at this imperturbable young man. Was there a hidden meaning in that answer?

"What's the matter with Wadley? Does he expect you to let Ford run it over you? That ain't like Clint."

"He's likely listened to a pack o' lies."

"And you have n't heard from him since?"

"Yes, I have. He sent me my check an' a hundred-dollar bill."

Ellison sat up. "What for?"

"For my fancy bulldoggin'." The hard eyes of the young fellow smouldered with resentment.

"By dog, did Clint send you money for savin' 'Mona?"

"He did n't say what it was for — so I rolled up the bill an' lit a cigarette with it."

"You take expensive smokes, young man," chuckled the officer.

"It was on Wadley. I burned only half the bill. He can cash in the other half, for I sent it back to him. When he got it, he sent for me."

"And you went?"

"You know damn well I did n't. When he wants me, he knows where to find me."

"Most young hill-billies step when Clint tells 'em to."

"Do they?" asked the range-rider indifferently.

"You bet you. They jump when he whistles. What are you figurin' to do?"

"Have n't made up my mind yet. Mebbe I'll drift along the trail to the Pecos country."

"What was Clint payin' you?"

"Sixty a month an' found."

"How'd you like to have yore wages lowered?"

"Meanin'—"

"That I'll give you a job."

Young Roberts had a capacity for silence. He asked no questions now, but waited for Ellison to develop the situation.

"With the Rangers. Dollar a day an' furnish yore own bronc," explained the Captain.

"The State of Texas is liberal," said the cowboy with dry sarcasm.

"That's as you look at it. If you're a money-grubber, don't join us. But if you'd like to be one of the finest fightin' force in the world with somethin' doin' every minute, then you'd better sign up. I'll promise that you die young an' not in yore bed."

"Sounds right attractive," jeered the red-haired youngster with amiable irony.

"It is, for men with red blood in 'em," retorted the gray-haired fire-eater hotly.

"All right. I'll take your word for it, Captain. You've hired a hand."

CHAPTER VI

CLINT WADLEY'S MESSENGER

Outside the door of the commandant's office Arthur Ridley stood for a moment and glanced nervously up and down the dirt road. In a hog-leather belt around his waist was six thousand dollars just turned over to him by Major Ponsford as the last payment for beef steers delivered at the fort according to contract some weeks earlier.

Arthur had decided not to start on the return journey until next morning, but he was not sure his judgment had been good. It was still early afternoon. Before nightfall he might be thirty miles on his way. The trouble with that was that he would then have to spend two nights out, and the long hours of darkness with their flickering shadows cast by the camp-fires would be full of torture for him. On the other hand, if he should stay till morning, word might leak out from the officers' quarters that he was carrying a large sum of money.

A drunken man came weaving down the street. He stopped opposite Ridley and balanced himself with the careful dignity of the inebriate. But the gray eyes, hard as those of a gunman, showed no trace of intoxication. Nor did the steady voice.

"Friend, are you Clint Wadley's messenger?"

The startled face of Ridley flew a flag of confession. "Why — what do you mean?" he stammered. Nobody was to have known that he had come to get the money for the owner of the A T O.

"None of my business, you mean," flung back the man curtly. "Good enough! It ain't. What's more, I don't give a damn. But listen: I was at the Buffalo Hump when two fellows came in. Me, I was most asleep, and they sat in the booth next to me. I did n't hear all they said, but I got this — that they're aimin' to hold up some messenger of Clint Wadley after he leaves town tomorrow. You're the man, I reckon. All right. Look out for yourself. That's all."

"But — what shall I do?" asked Ridley.

"Do? I don't care. I'm tellin' you — see? Do as you please."

"What would *you* do?" The danger and the responsibility that had fallen upon him out of a sky of sunshine paralyzed the young man's initiative.

The deep-set, flinty eyes narrowed to slits. "What I'd do ain't necessarily what you'd better do. What are you, stranger — high-grade stuff, or the run o' the pen?"

"I'm no gun-fighter, if that's what you mean."

"Then I'd make my get-away like a jackrab-

bit hellpoppin' for its hole. I got one slant at these fellows in the Buffalo Hump. They're bully-puss kind o' men, if you know what I mean."

"I don't. I'm from the East."

"They'll run it over you, bluff you off the map, take any advantage they can."

"Will they fight?"

"They'll burn powder quick if they get the drop on you."

"What are they like?"

The Texan considered. "One is a tall, red-headed guy; the other's a sawed-off, hammered-down little runt — but gunmen, both of 'em, or I'm a liar."

"They would probably follow me," said the messenger, worried.

"You better believe they will, soon as they hear you've gone."

Arthur kicked a little hole in the ground with the toe of his shoe. What had he better do? He could stay at the fort, of course, and appeal to Major Ponsford for help. But if he did, he would probably be late for his appointment with Wadley. It happened that the cattleman and the army officer had had a sharp difference of opinion about the merits of the herd that had been delivered, and it was not at all likely that Ponsford would give him a military guard to Tascosa. Moreover, he had a feeling that the owner of the

A T O would resent any call to the soldiers for assistance. Clint Wadley usually played his own hand, and he expected the same of his men.

But the habit of young Ridley's life had not made for fitness to cope with a frontier emergency. Nor was he of stiff enough clay to fight free of his difficulty without help.

"What about you?" he asked the other man. "Can I hire you to ride with me to Tascosa?"

"As a tenderfoot-wrangler?" sneered the Texan.

Arthur flushed. "I've never been there. I don't know the way."

"You follow a gun-barrel road from the fort. But I'll ride with you — if the pay is right."

"What do you say to twenty dollars for the trip?"

"You've hired me."

"And if we're attacked?"

"I pack a six-shooter."

The troubled young man looked into the hard, reckless face of this stranger who had gone out of his way to warn him of the impending attack. No certificate was necessary to tell him that this man would fight.

"I don't know your name," said Ridley, still hesitating.

"Any more than I know yours," returned the other. "Call me Bill Moore, an' I'll be on hand to eat my share of the chuck."

"We'd better leave at once, don't you think?"

"You're the doc. Meet you here in an hour ready for the trail."

The man who called himself Bill Moore went his uncertain way down the street. To the casual eye he was far gone in drink. Young Ridley went straight to the corral where he had put up his horse. He watered and fed the animal, and after an endless half-hour saddled the bronco.

Moore joined him in front of the officers' quarters, and together they rode out of the post. As the Texan had said, the road to Tascosa ran straight as a gun-barrel. At first they rode in silence, swiftly, leaving behind them mile after mile of dusty trail. It was a brown, level country thickly dotted with yucca. Once Moore shot a wild turkey running in the grass. Prairie-chicken were abundant, and a flight of pigeons numbering thousands passed at one time over their heads and obscured the sky.

"Goin' down to the *encinal* to roost," explained Moore.

"A man could come pretty near living off his rifle in this country," Arthur remarked.

"Outside o' flour an' salt, I've done it many a time. I rode through the Pecos Valley to Fort Sumner an' on to Denver oncet an' lived off the land. Time an' again I've done it from the Brazos to the Canadian. If he gets tired of game, a man

can jerk the hind quarters of a beef. Gimme a young turkey fed on sweet mast an' cooked on a hackberry bush fire, an' I'll never ask for better chuck," the Texan promised.

In spite of Ridley's manifest desire to push on far into the night, Moore made an early camp.

"No use gauntin' our broncs when we've got all the time there is before us. A horse is a man's friend. He don't want to waste it into a sorry-lookin' shadow. Besides, we're better off here than at Painted Rock. It's nothin' but a whistlin'-post in the desert."

"Yes, but I'd like to get as far from the fort as we can. I — I'm in a hurry to reach Tascosa," the younger man urged.

Moore opened a row of worn and stained teeth to smile. "Don't worry, young fellow. I'm with you now."

After they had made camp and eaten, the two men sat beside the flickering fire, and Moore told stories of the wild and turbulent life he had known around Dodge City and in the Lincoln County War that was still waging in New Mexico. He had freighted to the Panhandle from El Moro, Colorado, from Wichita Falls, and even from Dodge. The consummate confidence of the man soothed the unease of the young fellow with the hogskin belt. This plainsman knew all that the Southwest had to offer of danger and was equal to any of it.

Presently Arthur Ridley grew drowsy. The last that he remembered before he fell asleep was seeing Moore light his pipe again with a live coal from the fire. The Texan was to keep the first watch.

It was well along toward morning when the snapping of a bush awakened Ridley. He sat upright and reached quickly for the revolver by his side.

"Don't you," called a voice sharply from the brush.

Two men, masked with slitted handkerchiefs, broke through the shin-oak just as Arthur whipped up his gun. The hammer fell once — twice, but no explosion followed. With two forty-fives covering him, Ridley, white to the lips, dropped his harmless weapon.

Moore came to life with sleepy eyes, but he was taken at a disadvantage, and with a smothered oath handed over his revolver.

"Wha-what do you want?" asked Ridley, his teeth chattering.

The shorter of the two outlaws, a stocky man with deep chest and extraordinarily broad shoulders, growled an answer.

"We want that money of Clint Wadley's you're packin'."

The camp-fire had died to ashes, and the early-morning air was chill. Arthur felt himself trembling so that his hands shook. A prickling of the

skin went goose-quilling down his back. In the dim light those masked figures behind the business-like guns were sinister with the threat of mystery and menace.

"I — have n't any money," he quavered.

"You'd better have it, young fellow, me lad!" jeered the tall bandit. "We're here strictly for business. Dig up."

"I don't reckon he's carryin' any money for Clint," Moore argued mildly. "Don't look reasonable that an old-timer like Clint, who knocked the bark off'n this country when I was still a kid, would send a tenderfoot to pack gold 'cross country for him."

The tall man swung his revolver on Moore. "'Nuff from you," he ordered grimly.

The heavy-set outlaw did not say a word. He moved forward and pressed the cold rim of his forty-five against the forehead of the messenger. The fluttering heart of the young man beat hard against his ribs. His voice stuck in his throat, but he managed to gasp a surrender.

"It's in my belt. For God's sake, don't shoot."

"Gimme yore belt."

The boy unbuckled the ribbon of hogskin beneath his shirt and passed it to the man behind the gun. The outlaw noticed that his fingers were cold and clammy.

"Stand back to back," commanded the heavy man.

Deftly he swung a rope over the heads of his captives, jerked it tight, wound it about their bodies, knotted it here and there, and finished with a triple knot where their heels came together.

"That'll hold 'em hitched a few minutes," the lank man approved after he had tested the rope.

"I'd like to get a lick at you fellows. I will, too, some day," mentioned Moore casually.

"When you meet up with us we'll be there," retorted the heavy-weight. "Let's go, Steve."

The long man nodded. "*Adiós*, boys."

"See you later, and when I meet up with you, it'll be me 'n' you to a finish," the Texan called.

The thud of the retreating hoofs grew faint and died. Already Moore was busy with the rope that tied them together.

"What's the matter, kid? You shakin' for the drinks? Did n't you see from the first we were n't in any danger? If they'd wanted to harm us, they could have shot us from the brush. How much was in that belt?"

"Six thousand dollars," the boy groaned.

"Well, it does n't cost you a cent. Cheer up, son."

By this time Moore had both his arms free and was loosening one of the knots.

"I was in charge of it. I'll never dare face Mr. Wadley."

"Sho! It was his own fault. How in Mexico

come he to send a boy to market for such a big stake?"

"Nobody was to have known what I came for. I don't see how it got out."

"Must 'a' been a leak somewhere. Don't you care. Play the hand that's dealt you and let the boss worry. Take it from me, you're lucky not to be even powder-burnt when a shot from the chaparral might have done yore business."

"If you only had n't fallen asleep!"

"Reckon I dozed off. I was up 'most all last night." Moore untied the last knot and stepped out from the loop. "I'm goin' to saddle the broncs. You ride in to Tascosa and tell Wadley. I'll take up the trail an' follow it while it's warm. We'll see if a pair of shorthorns can run a sandy like that on me." He fell suddenly into the violent, pungent speech of the mule-skinner.

"I'll go with you," announced Ridley. He had no desire to face Clint Wadley with such a lame tale.

The cold eyes of the Texan drilled into his. "No, you won't. You'll go to town an' tell the old man what's happened. Tell him to send his posse across the *malpais* toward the rim-rock. I'll meet him at Two Buck Crossin' with any news I've got."

A quarter of an hour later the hoofs of his horse flung back faint echoes from the distance. The boy collapsed. His head sank into his hands and his misery found vent in sobs.

CHAPTER VII

THE DANCE

Long since the sun had slid behind the horizon edge and given place to a desert night of shimmering moonlight and far stars. From the enchanted mesa Rutherford Wadley descended to a valley draw in which were huddled a score of Mexican *jacals*, huts built of stakes stuck in a trench, roofed with sod and floored with mud. Beyond these was a more pretentious house. Originally it had been a log "hogan," but a large adobe addition had been constructed for a store. Inside this the dance was being held.

Light filtered through the chinks in the mud. From door and windows came the sounds of scraping fiddles and stamping feet. The singsong voice of the caller and the occasional whoop of a cowboy punctuated the medley of noises.

A man whose girth would have put Falstaff to shame greeted Rutherford wheezily. "Fall off and 'light, Ford. She's in full swing and the bridle's off."

The man was Jumbo Wilkins, line-rider for the A T O.

Young Wadley swung to the ground. He did not trouble to answer his father's employee. It was in little ways like this that he endeared him-

self to those at hand, and it was just this spirit that the democratic West would not tolerate. While the rider was tying his horse to the hitch-rack, Jumbo Wilkins, who was a friendly soul, made another try at conversation.

"Glad you got an invite. Old man Cobb had n't room for everybody, so he did n't make his bid wide open."

The young man jingled up the steps. "That so? Well, I did n't get an invite, as you call it. But I'm here." He contrived to say it so offensively that Jumbo flushed with anger.

Wadley sauntered into the room and stood for a moment by the door. His trim, graceful figure and dark good looks made him at once a focus of eyes. Nonchalantly he sunned himself in the limelight, with that little touch of swagger that captures the imagination of girls. No man in the cow-country dressed like Rutherford Wadley. In the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed are kings, and to these frontier women this young fellow was a glass of fashion. There was about him, too, a certain dash, a spice of the devil more desirable in a breaker of hearts than any mere beauty.

His bold, possessive eyes ranged over the room to claim what they might desire. He had come to the dance at Tomichi Creek to make love to Tony Alviro's betrothed sweetheart Bonita.

She was in the far corner with her little court

about her. If Bonita was a flirt, it must be admitted she was a charming one. No girl within a day's ride was so courted as she. Compact of fire and passion, brimming with life and health, she drew men to her as the flame the moth.

Presently the music started. Bonita, in the arms of Tony, floated past Rutherford, a miracle of supple lightness. A flash of soft eyes darted at the heir of the A T O ranch. In them was a smile adorable and provocative.

As soon as the dance was over, Wadley made his way indolently toward her. He claimed the next waltz.

She had promised it to Tony, the girl said — and the next.

"Tony can't close-herd you," laughed Rutherford. "His title ain't clear yet — won't be till the priest has said so. You'll dance the second one with me, Bonita."

"We shall see, *señor*," she mocked.

But the Mexican blood in the girl beat fast. In her soft, liquid eyes lurked the hunger for sex adventure. And this man was a prince of the blood — the son of Clint Wadley, the biggest cattleman in West Texas.

There were challenging stars of deviltry in Bonita's eyes when they met those of Rutherford over the shoulder of Alviro while she danced, but the color was beating warm through her dark skin. The lift of her round, brown throat to

an indifferent tilt of the chin was mere pretense. The languorous passion of the South was her inheritance, and excitement mounted in her while she kept time to the melodious dance.

Alviro was master of ceremonies, and Wadley found his chance while the young Mexican was of necessity away from Bonita. Rutherford bowed to her with elaborate mockery.

"Come. Let us walk in the moonlight, sweetheart," he said.

Bonita turned to him with slow grace. The eyes of the man and the woman met and fought. In hers there was a kind of savage fierceness, in his an insolent confidence.

"No," she answered.

"Ah! You're afraid of me — afraid to trust yourself with me," he boasted.

She was an untutored child of the desert, and his words were a spur to her quick pride. She rose at once, her bosom rising and falling fast. She would never confess that — never.

The girl walked beside him with the fluent grace of youth, beautiful as a forest fawn. In ten years she would be fat and slovenly like her Mexican mother, but now she carried her slender body as a queen is supposed to but does not. Her heel sank into a little patch of mud where some one had watered a horse. Under the cottonwoods she pulled up her skirt a trifle and made a *moue* of disgust at the soiled slipper.

"See what you've done!" Small, even teeth gleamed in a coquettish smile from the ripe lips of the little mouth. He understood that he was being invited to kneel and clean the mud-stained shoe.

"If you're looking for a doormat to wipe your feet on, I'll send for Tony," he jeered.

The father of Bonita was Anglo-Saxon. She flashed anger at his presumption.

"Don't you think it. Tony will never be a doormat to anybody. Be warned, *señor*, and do not try to take what is his."

Again their eyes battled. Neither of them saw a man who had come out from the house and was watching them from the end of the porch.

"I take what the gods give, my dear, and ask leave of no man," bragged Wadley.

"Or woman?"

"Ah! That is different. When the woman is Bonita, *muchacha*, I am her slave."

He dropped to one knee and with his handkerchief wiped the mud from the heel of her slipper. For a moment his fingers touched lightly the trim little ankle; then he rose quickly and caught her in his arms.

"Sometime — soon — it's going to be me and you, sweetheart," he whispered.

"Don't," she begged, struggling against herself and him. "If Tony sees —"

His passion was too keen-edged to take warn-

ing. He kissed her lips and throat and eyes. The eyes of the watcher never wavered. They were narrowed to shining slits of jet.

"Why do you come and — and follow me?" the girl cried softly. "It is not that you do not know Tony is jealous. This is not play with him. He loves me and will fight for me. You are mad."

"For love of you!" he laughed triumphantly.

She knew he lied. The instinct that served her for a conscience had long since told her as much. But her vanity, and perhaps something deeper, craved satisfaction. She wanted to believe he meant it. Under his ardent gaze the long lashes of the girl drooped to her dusky cheeks. It was Tony she loved, but Tony offered her only happiness and not excitement.

A moment later she gave a startled little cry and pushed herself free. Her dilated eyes were fixed on something behind the cattleman.

Rutherford, warned by her expression, whirled on his heel.

Tony Alviro, knife in hand, was close upon him. Wadley lashed out hard with his left and caught the Mexican on the point of the chin.

The blow lifted Tony from his feet and flung him at full length to the ground. He tried to rise, groaned — rolled over.

Bonita was beside him in an instant. From where she knelt, with Tony's dark head in her

arms pressed close to her bosom, she turned fiercely on Wadley.

"I hate you, dog of a *gringo!* You are all one big lie through and through — what they call bad egg — no good!"

Already half a dozen men were charging from the house. Jumbo pinned Wadley's arms by the elbows to prevent him from drawing a revolver.

"What's the rumpus?" he demanded.

"The fellow tried to knife me in the back," explained Rutherford. "Jealous, because I took his girl."

"So?" grunted Wilkins. "Well, you'd better light a shuck out o' here. You came on yore own invite. You can go on mine."

"Why should I go? I'll see you at Tombstone first."

"Why?" Jumbo's voice was no longer amiable and ingratiating. "Because you gave Tony a raw deal, an' he's got friends here. Have *you?*"

Wadley looked round and saw here and there Mexican faces filled with sullen resentment. It came to him swiftly that this was no place for his father's son to linger.

"I don't push my society on any one," he said haughtily. "If I ain't welcome, I'll go. But I serve notice right here that any one who tries to pull a knife on me will get cold lead next time."

Jumbo, with his arm tucked under that of Wadley, led the way to the house. He untied the

rein of Rutherford's horse and handed it to the son of his boss.

"*Vamos!*" he said.

The young man pulled himself to the saddle. "You're a hell of a friend," he snarled.

"Who said anything about bein' a friend? I'm particular about when I use that word," replied Wilkins evenly, with hard eyes.

Wadley's quirt burned the flank of the cow-pony and it leaped for the road.

When five minutes later some one inquired for Tony he too had disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII

RUTHERFORD MAKES A MISTAKE

Rutherford Wadley struck across country toward the rim-rock. Anger burned high in him, and like the bully he was he took it out of his good horse by roweling its sides savagely. He plunged into the curly mesquite, driving forward straight as an arrow. Behind him in the darkness followed a shadow, sinister and silent, out of sight, but within sound of the horse's footfall. It stopped when Wadley stopped; when he moved, it moved.

Midnight found young Wadley still moving straight forward, the moon on his left. Painted Rock was ten miles to the west. Except for the stage station there, and the settlement he had left, there was no other habitation for fifty miles. It was a wilderness of silence.

Yet in that waste of empty space Rutherford "jumped up" a camper. The man was a trader, carrying honey and pecans to Fort Worth. He was awakened by the sound of a raucous curse, he testified later, and in the bright moonlight saw the young cattleman beating his horse. Evidently the young animal had been startled at sight of his white-topped wagon.

An angry sentence or two passed between the

men before the cattleman moved over the hill-brow. As the trader rolled up again in his *sugun*, there came to him faintly the sound of another horse. He was not able to explain later why this struck him as ominous, beyond the strangeness of the fact that two men, not in each other's company, should be traveling so close together in the desert. At any rate, he rose, crept forward to a clump of Spanish bayonet, and from behind it saw a young Mexican pass along the swale. He was close enough almost to have touched him, and in the rich moonlight saw the boyish face clearly.

By the time Wadley reached the rough country of the cap-rock, the young day was beginning to awaken. A quail piped its morning greeting from the brush. A gleam of blue in the dun sky flashed warning of a sun soon to rise. He had struck the rim-rock a little too far to the right, and deflected from his course to find the pocket he was seeking. For half a mile he traveled parallel to the ridge, then turned into a break in the wall. At the summit of a little rise he gave a whistle.

Presently, from above a big boulder, a head appeared cautiously.

"Hello, out there! Who is it?"

"Ford."

The rider swung to the ground stiffly and led his horse forward down a sharply descending

path to a little draw. A lank, sallow man with a rifle joined him. With his back to a flat rock, a heavy-set, broad-shouldered fellow was lounging.

"'Lo, Ford. Didn't expect you to-night," he grumbled.

"Drifted over from the dance at Tomichi Creek. Beat up a young Mexican and had to get out."

"You're such a sullen brute! Why can't you let folks alone?" Pete Dinsmore wanted to know.

He was annoyed. Rutherford Wadley was not a partner in the business on hand to-night, and he would rather the man had been a hundred miles away.

"He got jealous and tried to knife me," explained the heir of the A T O sulkily.

"You durn fool! Won't you ever learn sense? Who was it this time?"

"Tony Alviro. His girl's crazy about me."

The keen, hard eyes of Dinsmore took in the smug complacency of the handsome young cad. He knew that this particular brand of fool would go its own way, but he wasted a word of advice.

"I don't guess you want any pearls o' wisdom from me, but I'll onload some gratis. You let Bonita Menendez alone or Tony will camp on yore trail till he gits you."

"Sure will," agreed Gurley, setting down his

rifle. "Them Mexicans hang together, too. We need their friendship in our business. Better lay off them."

"I don't remember askin' your advice, Gurley."

"Well, I'm givin' it. See?"

Another sharp whistle cut the air. Gurley picked up the rifle again and climbed the lookout rock. Presently he returned with a dismounted horseman. The man was the one who had introduced himself to Arthur Ripley a few hours earlier as Bill Moore.

"Howdy, boys. Got the stuff all safe?" he asked cheerfully.

From behind Wadley Pete Dinsmore was making a series of facial contortions. Unfortunately the new arrival did not happen to be looking at him, and so missed the warning.

"Never saw anything work prettier," Moore said with a grin as he put down his saddle on a boulder. "Ridley had n't ought to be let out without a nurse. He swallowed my whole yarn — gobbled down bait, sinker an' line. Where's the gold, Pete?"

"In a sack back of the big rock." Pete was disgusted with his brother Homer, *alias* Bill Moore. They would probably have to divide with young Wadley now, to keep his mouth shut.

Rutherford jumped at the truth. His father had told him that he was going to give Art Rid-

ley a try-out by sending him to the fort for a payment of gold. Probably he, Rutherford, had mentioned this to one of the gang when he was drunk. They had held up the messenger, intending to freeze him out of any share of the profits. All right — he would show them whether he was a two-spot.

"Bring out the sack. Let's have a look at it," he ordered.

Gurley handed the sack to Pete Dinsmore, and the men squatted in a circle tailor-fashion.

"Smooth work, I call it," said Homer Dinsmore. He explained to Wadley why he was of this opinion. "Steve heard tell of a wagon-train goin' to Tascosa to-day. If Ridley slept overnight at the fort he would hear of it an' stay with the freight outfit till he had delivered the gold to yore dad. We had to get him started right away. So I pulled on him a story about hearin' the boys intended to hold him up. He hired me as a guard to help him stand off the bad men. Whilst I was keepin' watch I fixed up his six-shooter so's it would n't do any damage if it went off. Best blamed piece of work I ever did pull off. I'd ought to get a half of what we took off'n him instead of a third."

"A third! Who says you get a third?" asked Wadley.

"Three of us did this job, did n't we?" cut in Gurley.

"Sure. You took what belongs to me — or at least to my dad," protested young Wadley. "Tried to slip one over on me. Guess again, boys. I won't stand for it."

The jade eyes of the older brother narrowed. "Meanin' just what, Ford?"

"What do you take me for, Pete? Think I'm goin' to let you rob me of my own money an' never cheep? I'll see you all in blazes first," cried Wadley wildly.

"Yes, but—just what would you do about it?"

"Do? I'll ride to town an' tell Cap Ellison. I'll bust you up in business, sure as hell's hot."

There was a moment of chill silence. Three of the four men present knew that Rutherford Wadley had just passed sentence of death upon himself. They had doubted him before, vaguely, and without any definite reason. But after this open threat the fear that he would betray them would never lift until he was where he could no longer tell tales.

"How much of this money do you think is comin' to you, Ford?" asked Pete quietly.

"It 's all mine, anyhow. You boys know that." Rutherford hesitated; then his greed dominated. He had them where they had to eat out of his hand. "Give me two thirds, an' you fellows divide the other third for your trouble. That's fair."

"Goddlemighty, what's eatin' you?" Gurley

exploded. "Think we're plumb idjits? You 'n' me will mix bullets first, you traitor!"

The Dinsmores exchanged one long, significant look. Then Pete spoke softly.

"Don't get on the prod, Steve. Ford sure has got us where the wool 's short, but I reckon he aims to be reasonable. Let's say half for you, Ford, an' the other half divided among the rest of us."

Wadley had refreshed himself out of a bottle several times during the night. Ordinarily he would have accepted the proposed compromise, but the sullen and obstinate side of him was uppermost.

"You've heard my terms, Pete. I stand pat."

Again a significant look passed, this time between Pete Dinsmore and Gurley.

"All right," said Homer Dinsmore shortly. "It's a raw deal you're givin' us, but I reckon you know yore own business, Wadley."

The money was emptied from the pigskin belt and divided. Rutherford repacked his two thirds in the belt and put it on next his shirt.

"I don't know what you fellows are goin' to do, but I'm goin' to strike for town," he said. "I aim to get back in time to join one of the posses in their hunt for the outlaws."

His jest did not win any smiles. The men grimly watched him saddle and ride away. A quarter of an hour later they too were in the saddle.

CHAPTER IX

MURDER IN THE CHAPARRAL

To Jack Roberts, engaged at the Delmonico restaurant in the serious business of demolishing a steak smothered in onions, came Pedro Menendez with a strange story of a man lying dead in the rim-rock, a bullet-hole in the back of his head.

The Mexican *vaquero* came to his news haltingly. He enveloped it in mystery. There was a dead man lying at the foot of Battle Butte, out in the rim-rock country, and there was this wound in the back of his head. That was all. Pedro became vague at once as to detail. He took refuge in shrugs and a poor memory when the Ranger pressed him in regard to the source of his information.

Roberts knew the ways of the Mexicans. They would tell what they wanted to tell and no more. He accepted the news given him and for the moment did not push his questions home.

For twenty-four hours the Ranger had been in the saddle, and he was expecting to turn in for a round-the-clock sleep. But Pedro's tale changed his mind. Captain Ellison was at Austin, Lieutenant Hawley at Tascosa. Regretfully Roberts gave up his overdue rest and ordered another cup

of strong coffee. Soon he was in the saddle again with a fresh horse under him.

The Panhandle was at its best. Winter snows and spring rains had set it blooming. The cacti were a glory of white, yellow, purple, pink, and scarlet blossoms. The white, lilylike flowers of the Spanish bayonet flaunted themselves everywhere. Meadowlarks chirruped gayly and prairie-hens fluttered across the path in front of the rider.

Battle Butte had received its name from an old tradition of an Indian fight. Here a party of braves had made a last stand against an overwhelming force of an enemy tribe. It was a flat mesa rising sharply as a sort of bastion from the rim-rock. The erosions of centuries had given it an appearance very like a fort.

Jack skirted the base of the butte. At the edge of a clump of prickly pear he found the evidence of grim tragedy which the circling buzzards had already warned him to expect. He moved toward it very carefully, in order not to obliterate any footprints. The body lay face down in a huddled heap, one hand with outstretched finger reaching forth like a sign-post. A bullet-hole in the back of the head showed how the man had come to his death. He had been shot from behind.

The Ranger turned the body and recognized it as that of Rutherford Wadley. The face was crushed and one of the arms broken. It was an

easy guess that the murder had been done on the butte above and the body flung down.

Jack, on all fours, began to quarter over the ground like a bloodhound seeking a trail. Every sense in him seemed to quicken to the hunt. His alert eyes narrowed in concentration. His fingertips, as he crept forward, touched the sand soft as velvet. His body was tense as a coiled spring. No cougar stalking its prey could have been more lithely wary.

For the Ranger had found a faint boot-track, and with amazing pains he was following this delible record of guilt. Some one had come here and looked at the dead body. Why? To make sure that the victim was quite dead? To identify the victim? Roberts did not know why, but he meant to find out.

The footprint was alone. Apparently none led to it or led from it. On that one impressionable spot alone had been written the signature of a man's presence.

But "Tex" Roberts was not an old plainsman for nothing. He knew that if he were patient enough he would find other marks of betrayal.

He found a second track — a third, and from them determined a course to follow. It brought him to a stretch of soft ground at the edge of a wash. The footprints here were sharp and distinct. They led up an arroyo to the bluff above.

The Ranger knelt close to the most distinct

print and studied it for a long time. All its details and peculiarities were recorded in his mind. The broken sole, the worn heel, the beveled edge of the toe-cap — all these fastened themselves in his memory. With a tape-line he measured minutely the length of the whole foot, of the sole and of the heel. These he jotted down in his notebook, together with cross-sections of width. He duplicated this process with the best print he could find of the left foot.

His investigation led him next to the summit of the bluff. A little stain of blood on a rock showed him where Wadley had probably been standing when he was shot. The murder might have been done by treachery on the part of one of his companions. If so, probably the bullet had been fired from a revolver. In that case the man who did it would have made sure by standing close behind his victim. This would have left powder-marks, and there had been none around the wound. The chances were that the shooting had been done from ambush, and if this was a true guess, it was a fair deduction that the assassin had hidden behind the point of rocks just back of the bluff. For he could reach that point by following the rim-rock without being seen by his victim.

Roberts next studied the ground just back of the point of rocks. The soil here was of disintegrated granite, so that there were no footprints

to betray anybody who might have been hidden there. But Jack picked up something that was in its way as decisive as what he had been seeking. It was a cartridge that had been ejected from a '73 [1] rifle. The harmless bit of metal in his hand was the receptacle from which death had flashed across the open toward Ford Wadley.

At the foot of the rim-rock the Ranger found signs where horses had been left. He could not at first make sure whether there were three or four. From that spot he back-tracked for miles along the edge of the rim-rock till he came to the night-camp where Wadley had met the outlaws. This, too, he studied for a long time.

He had learned a good deal, but he did not know why Ford Wadley had been shot. The young fellow had not been in Texas more than six or eight months, and he could not have made many enemies. If he had nothing about him worth stealing — and in West Texas men were not in the habit of carrying valuables — the object could not have been robbery.

He rode back to Battle Butte and carried to town with him the body of the murdered man. There he heard two bits of news, either of which might serve as a cause for the murder: Young Wadley had quarreled with Tony Alviro at a

[1] The '73 rifle was not a seventy-three-caliber weapon, but was named from the year it was got out. Its cartridges could be used for a forty-four revolver.

dance and grossly insulted him; Arthur Ridley had been robbed of six thousand dollars by masked men while on his way to Tascosa.

Ranger Roberts decided that he would like to have a talk with Tony.

CHAPTER X

"A DAMNED POOR APOLOGY FOR A MAN"

THE big cattleman from New Mexico who was talking with the owner of the A T O threw his leg across the arm of the chair. "The grass is good on the Pecos this year. Up in Mexico [1] the cattle look fine."

"Same here," agreed Wadley. "I'm puttin' ten thousand yearlin's on the Canadian."

A barefoot negro boy appeared at his elbow with a note. The owner of the A T O ripped open the envelope and read:

DEAR MR. WADLEY:

I was held up last night by masked men and robbed. They took the gold. I'm too sick to go farther.

ARTHUR RIDLEY.

The jaw of the Texas cattleman clamped. He rose abruptly. "I got business on hand. A messenger of mine has been robbed of six thousand dollars." He turned to the colored boy. "Where's the man who gave you this?"

"At the Buffalo Corral, sah."

Wadley strode from the hotel, flung himself on a horse, and galloped down the street toward the corral.

[1] In western Texas when one speaks of Mexico he means New Mexico. If he refers to the country Mexico, he says Old Mexico.

Young Ridley was lying on a pile of hay when his employer entered. His heart was sick with fear and worry. For he knew now that his lack of boldness had led him into a serious mistake. He had by his indecision put himself in the power of Moore, and the chances were that the man was in collusion with the gang that had held him up. He had made another mistake in not going directly to Wadley with the news. The truth was that he had not the nerve to face his employer. It was quite on the cards that the old-timer might use a blacksnake whip on him. So he had taken refuge in a plea of illness.

The cattleman took one look at him and understood. He reached down and jerked the young fellow from the hay as if he had been a child. The stomach muscles of the boy contracted with fear and the heart died within him. Clint Wadley in anger was dangerous. In his youth he had been a gun-fighter and the habit had never entirely been broken.

"I — I'm ill," the young fellow pleaded.

"You'll be sure enough ill if you don't watch out. I'll gamble on that. Onload yore tale like shot off'n a shovel. Quit yore whinin'. I got no time for it."

Arthur told his story. The cattleman fired at him crisp, keen questions. He dragged from the trembling youth the when, where, and how of the robbery. What kind of pilgrim was this fellow

Moore? Was he tall? Short? Dark? Bearded? Young? Old? What were the masked men like? Did they use any names? Did he see their horses? Which way did they go?

The messenger made lame answers. Mostly he could only say, "I don't know."

"You're a damned poor apology for a man — not worth the powder to blow you up. You had n't the sand to fight for the money entrusted to you, nor the nerve to face me after you had lost it. Get out of here. *Vamos!* Don't ever let me hear yore smooth, glib tongue again."

The words of Wadley stung like hail. Arthur was thin-skinned; he wanted the good opinion of all those with whom he came in contact, and especially that of this man. Like a whipped cur he crept away and hid himself in the barn loft, alone with his soul-wounds.

From its window he watched the swift bustle of preparation for the pursuit. Wadley himself, big and vigorous to the last masculine inch of him, was the dominant figure. He gave curt orders to the members of the posse, arranged for supplies to be forwarded to a given point, and outlined plans of action. In the late afternoon the boy in the loft saw them ride away, a dozen lean, long-bodied men armed to the limit. With all his heart the watcher wished he could be like one of them, ready for any emergency that the rough-and-tumble life of the frontier might develop.

In every fiber of his jarred being he was sore. He despised himself for his failure to measure up to the standard of manhood demanded of him by his environment. Twice now he had failed. The memory of his first failure still scorched his soul. During ghastly hours of many nights he had lived over that moment when he had shown the white feather before Ramona Wadley. He had run for his life and left her alone to face a charging bull. It was no excuse to plead with himself that he could have done nothing for her if he had stayed. At least he could have pushed her to one side and put himself in the path of the enraged animal. The loss of the money was different. It had been due not wholly to lack of nerve, but in part at least to bad judgment. Surely there was something to be said for his inexperience. Wadley ought not to have sent him alone on such an errand, though of course he had sent him because he was the last man anybody was likely to suspect of carrying treasure. . . .

Late that night Ridley crept out, bought supplies, saddled his horse, and slipped into the wilderness. He was still writhing with self-contempt. There was a futile longing in his soul for oblivion to blot out his misery.

CHAPTER XI

ONE TO FOUR

THROUGH the great gray desert with its freakish effects of erosion a rider had moved steadily in the hours of star-strewn darkness. He had crossed the boundary of that No Man's Land which ran as a neutral strip between Texas and its neighbor and was claimed by each. Since the courts had as yet recognized the rights of neither litigant there was properly no State jurisdiction here. Therefore those at outs with the law fled to this strip and claimed immunity.

In the Panhandle itself law was a variable quantity. Its counties had been laid out and named, but not organized. For judicial purposes they were attached to Wheeler County. Even the Rangers did not pretend to police this district. When they wanted a man they went in and got him.

The rider swung at last from his saddle and dropped the bridle reins to the ground. He crept forward to some long, flat sheep-sheds that bulked dimly in the night shadows. Farther back, he could just make out the ghost of a dwelling-hut. Beyond that, he knew, was a Mexican village of three or four houses. A windmill reared its gaunt frame in the corral. A long trough was supplied by it with water for the sheep.

The night-rider dipped a bucket of water from the tank that fed the trough. He carried it to the gate of the corral and poured it slowly into the fine dust made by the sharp feet of the sheep, mixing the water and dust to a thick paste with the end of an old branding-iron. He brought bucket after bucket of water until he had prepared a bed of smooth mud of the proper consistency.

Before he had quite finished his preparation a dog inside the adobe hut began to bark violently. The interloper slipped over the fence and retreated to the darkness of the *barranca.*

From the direction of the hut men poured. The one crouching in the chaparral heard voices. He made out a snatch or two of talk in Spanish. The men were explaining to themselves that the dog must have been barking at a wolf or a coyote. Presently they trooped back into the house. Silence fell again over the night.

The man in the chaparral once more crept forward and climbed the fence. He made straight for the entrance of the corral. Carefully he examined the footprints written in the bed of mud he had prepared. One after another he studied them. Some had been crossed out or blotted by subsequent prints, but a few were perfect. One of these he scrutinized for a long time, measuring its dimensions with a tape-line from toe to heel, across the ball of the foot, the instep, and the

heel. When at last he straightened up his eyes were shining with satisfaction. He had found what he wanted.

Once more the dog was uneasy with growlings. The man retreated from the corral, returned to his horse, and rode away across the mesa. A quarter of an hour later he unsaddled, hobbled his horse, and rolled up in a blanket. Immediately he fell into sound sleep.

It was broad day when he wakened. The young morning sun bathed him in warmth. He lighted a fire of mesquite and boiled coffee. In his frying-pan he cooked flapjacks, after he had heated the jerked beef which he carried in his saddlebags. When he had eaten, he washed his pan with clean, fine sand, repacked his supplies, and rode forward past the sheep-corral to the village.

In front of a mud-and-log *tendejón* two Mexicans lounged. They watched him with silent hostility as he dismounted, tied his horse to a snubbing-post worn shiny as a razor-strap, and sauntered into the *tendejón*. This stranger wore the broad-rimmed felt hat and the buckskin suit of a Ranger, and none of that force was welcome here.

Back of a flimsy counter was a shelf upon which were half a dozen bottles and some glasses. One could buy here mescal, American whiskey, and even wine of a sort. The owner of the place, a white man, was talking to a young Mexican

at the time the Ranger entered. The proprietor looked hard at the Ranger with dislike he did not try to veil. The Mexican in front of the bar was a slim young man with quick eyes and an intelligent face. The Ranger recognized him at once as Tony Alviro.

"*Buenos!*" the Ranger said with the most casual of nods. "I've come to take you back with me, Tony."

The other two Mexicans had followed the Ranger into the room. The Texan stood sideways at the end of the bar, quite at his ease, the right forearm resting on the counter lightly. Not far from his fingers the butt of a revolver projected from a holster. In his attitude was no threat whatever, but decidedly a warning.

The four men watched him steadily.

"No, *Señor* Roberts," answered Alviro. "You can touch me not. I'm out of Texas."

"Mebbeso, Tony. But till I get further orders, this is Texas for me. You're goin' back with me."

Rangers and outlaws held different views about this strip of land. To the latter it was a refuge; law ended at its border; they could not be touched here by State constabulary. But the Ranger did not split hairs. He was law in the Panhandle, and if the man he wanted fled to disputed territory the Ranger went after him.

"Not so," argued Alviro. "If you arrest me in Texas, I say 'Bad luck,' but I go wiz you.

There you are an offizer, an' I am oblige' surrender. But in thees No Man's Land, we are man to man. I refuse."

The lift of excitement was in the voice of the young Mexican. He knew the record of the Texas Rangers. They took their men in dead or alive. This particular member of the force was an unusually tough nut to crack. In the heart of Tony was the drench of a chill wave. He was no coward, but he knew he had no such unflawed nerve as this man. Through his mind there ran a common laconic report handed in by Rangers returning from an assignment — "Killed while resisting arrest." Alviro did not want Ranger Roberts to write that about him.

"Better not, Alviro. I have a warrant for your arrest."

The Texan did not raise his voice. He made no movement to draw a gun. But to Tony, fascinated by his hard, steel-gray eyes, came the certainty that he must go or fight. They were four to one against the Ranger, but that would not make the least difference. In the curt alternative of this clean-jawed young officer was cold finality.

The worried eyes of the fugitive referred to his companions. They had agreed to stand by him, and he knew that if it came to a fight they would. But he wanted more than that. His glance was an appeal for one of them to make his decision for him.

The voice of the *tendejón*-keeper interjected itself smoothly. "You've played yore hand out, friend. We're four to one. You go back an' report nothin' doin'."

Roberts looked at the man, and a little shiver ran down the barkeeper's spine. "There won't be four of you when we get through arguin' this, *amigo*, if we ever start," the Ranger suggested gently.

The proprietor of the place dropped his hand to the butt of his gun. But he did not draw. Some deep, wise instinct warned him to go slow. He knew the others would take their cue from him. If he threw down the gage of battle the room would instantly become a shambles. How many of them would again pass alive through the door nobody knew. He was a man who had fought often, but he could not quite bring himself to such a decision while those chilled-steel eyes bored into his. Anyhow, the game was not worth the candle.

"What is it you want Tony for?" he temporized, playing for time and any chance that might arise.

"For killin' Rutherford Wadley last month."

"A mistake. Tony has been here since the full of the moon."

"Oh, no. He was at the dance on Tomichi Creek. He tried to knife young Wadley. He left the house right after him."

"I left — *sí, señor* — but to come here," cried the accused man.

"To follow Wadley, Tony. You jumped a camper that night an' did n't know it. He saw you."

"Wadley was a dog, but I did not kill him," Alviro said gloomily.

"That so? You were on the spot. You left tracks. I measured 'em. They were the same tracks you left out in the corral five hours ago."

Tony's eyes flashed with a sudden discovery. "The mud — you meex it to get my footprints."

"You're a good guesser."

Alviro threw up his hands. "I was there. It iss true. But I did not kill the *gringo* dog. I was too late."

"You can tell me all about that on the way back."

"If I go back they will hang me."

"You'll get a fair trial."

"By a *gringo* jury before a *gringo* judge." The tone of Alviro was more than skeptical. It was bitter with the sense of racial injustice.

"I can't argue that with you, Tony. My business is to take you to Tascosa. That's what I'm here for."

The American behind the bar spoke again. "Listens fine! He's a Mexican, ain't he? They claim he killed a white man. Well, then, the mob would take him from you an' lynch him sure."

"The Rangers don't give up their prisoners, my friend. They take 'em an' they keep 'em. You'd ought to know that."

The *tendejón*-keeper flushed. He had been dragged to justice once by one of the force.

The eyes of the four consulted again. They were still hesitant. The shame of letting this youth take from them their companion without a fight was like a burr under a saddle-blanket to a bronco. But after all, the Ranger stood for law. If they killed him, other Rangers would come to avenge his death.

When men are in doubt the one who is sure dominates the situation. The eye of Roberts carried the compulsion of a deadly weapon. His voice was crisp.

"Come here, Tony," he ordered, and his fingers slipped into the pocket of his coat.

Alviro looked at him for a long second — swore to himself that he would not come — and came.

"Hold out yore hands."

The Mexican set his will to refuse. There was still time to elect to fight. He told himself that was what he was going to do. But he could not hold his own in that steady battle of the eyes. His hands moved forward — empty.

A moment, and the Ranger had slipped and fastened the handcuffs on his wrists.

Roberts had won. Psychologically it was now

too late for the others to resort to arms. The *tendejón*-keeper recognized this with a shrug that refused responsibility for the outcome. After all, Tony had made his own decision. He had chosen to take his chances in Tascosa rather than on the spot with the Ranger.

"Saddle Tony's horse," ordered Roberts, looking at one of the Mexicans.

The man growled something in his native tongue, but none the less he moved toward the corral.

Within a quarter of an hour the Ranger and his prisoner were on their way. Two days later Roberts delivered his man to the deputy sheriff who had charge of the sod-house jail in the little town.

"There's a message here for you from Cap Ellison," the deputy said. "He wants you to go to Clarendon. Says you were to jog on down soon as you show up here."

"All right, Snark."

He rode down next day, changed horses at the halfway station, and reached Clarendon early in the morning. Ellison had been called to Mobeetie, but left instructions for him to await his return.

The semi-weekly stage brought two days later a letter to Captain Ellison from Snark. Jack Roberts, obeying office instructions, opened the mail. The letter said:

DERE CAP,

They are aiming to lynch that Mexican Roberts brought in. The Dinsmore outfit is stirring up the town. Send a company of your Rangers, for God's sake, quick.

Respectably yours
JIM SNARK

Jack Roberts was the only Ranger in town. He glanced at the clock. There was just time to catch the stage to Tascosa. He reached for his guns and his hat.

CHAPTER XII

TEX REARRANGES THE SEATING

THE Tascosa stage was full. Its passengers were "packed like Yanks at Libby Prison," according to one of them, an ex-Confederate who had drifted West after the war. They were of the varied types common to the old Southwest — a drover, a cattle-buyer, a cowpuncher looking for a job, a smart salesman from St. Louis, and one young woman. Beside the driver on the box sat a long-bodied man in buckskin with a clean brown jaw and an alert, sardonic eye.

The salesman, a smooth, good-looking fellow whose eye instinctively rested on attractive women, made inquiries of Joe Johnson's old trooper.

"Who's the damsel?"

"Which?"

"The girl. She's a pippin." His possessive eye gloated on the young woman in front. "She did n't learn how to dress in this neck of the woods, either. Betcha she's from New Orleans or St. Louis."

The old warrior helped himself to a chew of tobacco. "You lose. She's Clint Wadley's daughter, an' he's an old-timer. Knocked the bark off'n this country, Clint did. I used to know him

when he was takin' the hides off the buffaloes. Got his start that way, I reckon. Clint's outfit got six thousand tongues in six months oncet. Pickled the tongues an' sold 'em for three cents apiece, by gum. Delivered the hides at Clarendon for one-fifty straight on contract."

"I've heard of Wadley," the salesman said. "What's the kid going to Tascosa for?"

"Goin' to stay awhile with her aunt, I 'low. Her brother was killed recent."

"I've heard about that, too. They caught the fellow, did n't they — the one that did it?"

"They got a Mexican jailed for it. I dunno whether he done it or not. That young Ranger on the box run him down."

"That kid in buckskin?" sneered the city man.

The ex-Confederate bristled at the tone rather than the words. He happened to be a friend of the youth mentioned.

"I'll follow Jack's dust any day of the week. He's one hell-poppin' rooster. No better man rides leather. When I druv a wagon oncet gatherin' bones —"

"Gathering bones?"

"Sure — buffalo-bones, for fertilizer. Well, that same Jack Roberts yanked me out o' the Canadian when I was drowndin'. Took a big chance, too."

"What about this Mexican? Are they going to hang him?"

"I reckon. He's in a soddy up at Tascosa. I done heard they're aimin' to tear it down and hang him to a wagon-tongue."[1]

The black-haired traveling man caressed his little mustache and watched the girl boldly. Her face was a little wan, and in the deep eyes was shadowed a heartache. But it had been impossible even for grief to submerge the sweet youth in her. There were lights in her soft, wavy hair, and the line of her exquisite throat would have delighted a sculptor. The slim figure was exquisitely poised, though just now it suggested weariness.

When the stage stopped at noon for dinner the salesman made it a point to sit beside her at the long table. His persistent attentions to the girl made the delicate color of her cheek deepen. She was too shy, too unused to the world, to know how to suppress his audacities effectively. But it was plain to one young man sitting at the opposite end of the table that the familiarities of the man were unwelcome.

While they were waiting outside for the change-horses to be hitched, the Ranger made a request of the old soldier.

"Wish you'd swap places with me, Sam."

"Sure. I'd a heap ruther sit outside. Say, that drummer had n't ought to worry Miss Ramona.

[1] There was no timber in the Panhandle. The first man ever hanged in the short-grass country was suspended from a propped-up wagon-tongue.

She's not feelin' very peart, anyhow. I reckon she set the world an' all by that scalawag brother of hers."

"He's not goin' to trouble her any more, Sam."

The ex-Confederate looked at the narrow-flanked young man with an alert question in his eye. If "Tex" Roberts was going to take a hand, the salesman was certainly riding for a fall.

The salesman had made up his mind to sit beside Miss Wadley for the rest of the journey. He emerged from the dining-room at her heels and was beside her to offer a hand into the stage.

Ramona gave him a look of reproach and entreaty. She was near tears. The man from St. Louis smiled confidently.

"I know a good thing when I see it," he whispered. "I'll ride beside you and keep off the rough-necks, Miss Wadley."

A heavy heel smashed down on the toes of his neat shoe and crunched round. A hard elbow bumped up forcefully against his chin as if by accident. A muscular hand caught the loose fat of his plump stomach and tightened like a vise. The dapper salesman opened his mouth in a shriek of pain.

"Indigestion?" asked the Ranger sympathetically, and his sinewy fingers twisted in the cushion of flesh they gripped. "I'll get you somethin' good for it in a minute."

Roberts flung the man back and rearranged the seating inside so that the drover sat beside Ramona as before dinner. Then he tucked an arm under that of the St. Louis man and led him back into the stage station. The salesman jerked along beside him unhappily. His wrist, wrenched by Roberts in a steady pressure of well-trained muscles, hurt exquisitely. When at last he was flung helplessly into a chair, tears of pain and rage filled his eyes. Never in the course of a cushioned and pampered life had he been so manhandled.

"My God, you brute, you've killed me!" he sobbed.

"Sho! I haven't begun yet. If you take the stage to-day to Tascosa I'm goin' to sit beside you real friendly, an' we'll play like we been doin' all the way in to town. It's just my way of bein' neighborly."

"I'll have the law of you for this," the city man howled, uncertain which of his injuries to nurse first.

"I would," agreed the Texan. "Well, so long, if you ain't comin'."

Roberts moved back with long, easy stride to the stage. He nodded to the driver.

"All ready, Hank. The drummer ain't feelin' well. He'll stay here overnight. I reckon I'll keep my own seat outside, Sam." And Roberts swung himself up.

The old soldier climbed in, chuckling to himself. It had been the neatest piece of work he had ever seen. The big body of the cowboy had been between Ramona and her tormentor, so that she did not know what had taken place. She did know, however, that the woman-killer had been obliterated swiftly from her path.

"Did you ever see anything like the way he got shet o' that drummer?" Sam asked his neighbor in a whisper. "I'll bet that doggoned masher will be hard to find when Jack's on the map. He's some go-getter boy, Jack Roberts is."

Meanwhile Jack was flagellating himself. It was his bad luck always to be associated in the mind of Miss Wadley with violence. He had beaten up the brother whom she was now mourning. He had almost been the cause of her own death. Now a third time she saw him in the rôle of a trouble-maker. To her, of course, he could be nothing but a bully and a bad lot. The least he could do was to make himself as inconspicuous as possible for the rest of the journey.

Man may shuffle the pack, but when all is done woman is likely to cut the cards. The driver stopped at Tin Cup Creek to water the horses. To Jack, sitting on the box, came the cattle-drover with orders.

"The young lady has somethin' to say to you, Tex. You're to swap seats with me."

The lean, bronzed young man swung down.

He had, when he wished, a wooden face that told no tales. It said nothing now of a tide of blood flushing his veins.

By a little gesture the girl indicated the seat beside her. Not till the creaking of the moving stage drowned her words did she speak. Her eyes were dilated with excitement.

"I overheard them talking in the back seat," she said. "They think there's going to be a lynching at Tascosa — that the mob is going to hang the Mexican who killed my brother. Are you going to let them do it?"

"Not in this year of our Lord, Miss Wadley," he answered evenly.

"Can you stop them?"

"That's what I draw a dollar a day for."

"You must n't let them do it!" she cried, a little wildly. "Let the law punish him!"

"Suits me. I'll try to persuade the boys to look at it that way."

"But what can you do? You're only a boy."

With a grim little smile he paraphrased Roy Bean's famous phrase: "I'm law east of the Pecos right now, Miss Wadley. Don't you worry. The Dinsmores won't get him if I can help it."

"I might speak to my father," she went on, thinking aloud. "But he's so bitter I'm afraid he won't do anything."

"He will after I've talked with him."

Her anxious young eyes rested in his clear,

steady gaze. There was something about this youth that compelled confidence. His broad-shouldered vigor, the virile strength so confidently reposeful, were expressions of personality rather than accidentals of physique.

The road dipped suddenly into a deep wash that was almost a little gulch. There was a grinding of brakes, then a sudden lurch that threw Ramona against the shoulder of the Ranger.

"The brake's done bust," she heard the ex-Confederate say.

Another violent swing flung Ramona outward. The horses were off the road, and the coach swayed ominously on two wheels. The girl caught at the Ranger's hand and clung to it. Gently he covered her hand with his other one, released his fingers, and put a strong arm round her shoulders.

Hank's whip snaked out across the backs of the wheelers. He flung at his horses a torrent of abuse. The stage reached the bottom of the wash in a succession of lurches. Then, as suddenly as the danger had come upon them, it had passed; the stage was safely climbing the opposite side of the ravine.

The Ranger's arm slipped from the shoulders of the girl. Her hand crept from under his. He did not look at her, but he knew that a shell-pink wave had washed into the wan face.

The slim bosom of the girl rose and fell fast.

Already she was beginning to puzzle over the difficulties of a clear-cut right and wrong, to discover that no unshaded line of cleavage differentiates them sometimes. Surely this young fellow could not be all bad. Of course she did not like him. She was quite sure of that. He was known as a tough citizen. He had attacked and beaten brutally her brother Rutherford — the wild brother whose dissipations she had wept and prayed over, and whose death she was now mourning. Yet Fate kept throwing him in her way to do her services. He had saved her life. He had adroitly — somehow, she did not quite know in what way — rid her of an offensive fellow traveler. She had just asked a favor of him, and there was yet another she must ask.

Ramona put off her request to the last moment. At Tascosa she left her purse in the stage seat and discovered it after the coach had started to the barn.

"My purse. I left it in the seat," she cried.

The announcement was made to the world at large, but it was intended for a particular pair of ears set close to a small head of wavy, sun-reddened hair. The owner of them ran to the stage and recovered the purse. By the time he reached Ramona, the rest of the party were inside the post-office.

She thanked him, then looked at him quickly with an effect of shy daring.

"You travel a good deal, don't you — about the country?"

"Considerable."

"I — I wonder if —" She took courage from his friendly smile. "I'm worried about Mr. Ridley — for fear something has happened to him."

"You mean an accident?" he asked gently.

"I don't know." Her cheeks flew color-signals of embarrassment. "My father was harsh to him. He's very sensitive. I feel — sort of responsible. He might do something foolish."

"I don't reckon he will. But I'll sure keep an eye out for him."

She gave him her little hand gratefully, then remembered what he had done to her brother and withdrew it hastily from his grip. In another moment she had passed into the post-office and left him alone.

CHAPTER XIII

"ONLY ONE MOB, AIN'T THERE?"

AFTER Miss Wadley had disappeared in the post-office a man touched Roberts on the shoulder.

"Where are the Rangers I sent for?" he asked.

"Here I am, Snark."

"You did n't come alone?"

"Captain Ellison was out of town. The rest of the force was away on assignment. I could n't reach any of 'em."

The deputy sheriff broke out in excited annoyance. "All right! I wash my hands of it. They can lynch the Mexican soon as they've a mind to. Let 'em go to it. Here I send for a company of Rangers, an' one kid shows up. What in Mexico can you do alone?"

"I would n't say alone. You're here, Snark."

"I'm not goin' to lift a hand — not a hand."

"Sure it's necessary? What makes you think they're goin' to lynch Alviro?"

"They don't make any bones of it. Everybody knows it. The Dinsmore gang is in town stirrin' up feelin'. You might as well have stayed away. There's not a thing you can do."

"I reckon mebbe we can figure a way to save Tony," answered the Ranger easily.

The deputy voiced his impatience. "Yore talk

sounds plumb foolish to me. Don't you get it? We're not dealin' with one or two men. Half the town is in this thing."

"I promised Tony there would be nothin' of that sort."

"You can't handle a mob all by yoreself, can you?" asked Snark sarcastically. "There's only one of you, I reckon."

The little flicker in the Ranger's eye was not wholly amusement. "There's goin' to be only one mob, too, ain't there?" he drawled.

"You can't slip him out unnoticed, if that's yore idee. They've got watchers round the jail," the deputy went on.

"I shan't try."

"Then you'll let 'em hang him?"

"Oh, no!"

"What in hell do you mean to do, then?"

Roberts told him, in part. The deputy shook his head vehemently.

"Can't be done. First place, you can't get Wadley to do it. He won't lift a hand to stop this hangin'. Second place, he could n't stop it if he wanted to. Folks in Tascosa ain't a bit gun-shy, an' right now they've got their necks bowed. An' this Dinsmore gang — they'll eat you alive if you get in their way."

"Mebbeso. You can't always be sure. I've got one card up my sleeve I have n't mentioned to you."

"If you want my opinion —"

The Ranger cut him off short. "I don't, Snark. Not right now. I'm too busy to listen to it. I want to know just one thing of you. Will you have the horses right where I want 'em when I want 'em?"

"You're the doc," acknowledged the deputy grudgingly. "They'll be there, but just the same I think it's a fool play. You can't get away with it."

Jack asked a question. "Where am I most likely to find Wadley?"

"At McGuffey's store. It's a block this-a-way and a block that-a-way." He indicated directions with his hand.

Wadley was not among those who sat on the porch of the general store known as McGuffey's Emporium. He had just gone to his sister's house to meet his daughter Ramona, of whose arrival he had received notice by a boy. Roberts followed him.

In answer to the Ranger's "Hello, the house!" the cattleman came out in his shirt-sleeves.

Jack cut straight to business.

"I've come to see you about that Mexican Alviro, Mr. Wadley. Is it true they're goin' to lynch him?"

The hard eyes of the grizzled Texan looked full at Roberts. This young fellow was the one who had beaten his son and later had had the impu-

dence to burn as a spill for a cigarette the hundred-dollar bill he had sent him.

"Whyfor do you ask me about it?" he demanded harshly.

"Because you've got to help me stop this thing."

The cattleman laughed mirthlessly. "They can go as far as they like for me. Suits me fine. Hangin' is too good for him. That's all I've got to say."

Already he had refused the pleadings of his daughter, and he had no intention of letting this young scalawag change his mind.

"Are you sure this Mexican is guilty — sure he's the man who killed yore son, Mr. Wadley?"

"He's as guilty as hell."

"I don't think it. Has n't it ever struck you as strange that yore son was killed an' yore messenger Ridley held up the same night, an' that the two things happened not many miles from each other?"

"Of course it has. I'm no fool. What of it?"

"I've always thought the same men did both."

"Young fellow, have you ever thought that Ridley never was held up, that it was a fake robbery pulled off to deceive me? Where is Ridley? He lit out mighty sudden when he saw how I took it. He could n't even tell me where the hold-up happened. I never did hit the trail of the robbers."

"It was n't a fake. I can prove that."

"I'm here to be shown," said the cattleman skeptically.

"But first about Tony. It looks bad for him on the surface. I'll admit that. But —"

"Don't talk to me about my boy's murderer, Roberts!" cried Wadley, flushing angrily. "I'll not do a thing for him. I'll help those that aim to do justice on him."

"He did n't kill yore son."

"What! Did n't you arrest him yoreself for it?"

"When I arrested him, I did n't believe he had done it. I know it now. He 's my star witness, an' I knew he would skip across the border if I let him out."

"You can't convince me, but let's hear yore fairy tale. I got to listen, I reckon."

Jack told his story in few words. He explained what he had found at the scene of the murder and how he had picked up the trail of the three horsemen who had followed Rutherford to the place of his death. He had back-tracked to the camp of the rendezvous at the rim-rock, and he had found there corroborative evidence of the statement Tony Alviro had made to him.

"What was it he told you, and what did you find?"

The big cattleman looked at him with a suspicion that was akin to hostility. His son had

been a ne'er-do-well. In his heart Wadley was not sure he had not been worse. But he was ready to fight at the drop of the hat any man who dared suggest it. He did not want to listen to any evidence that would lead him to believe ill of the son who had gone wrong.

"Tony admits all the evidence against him. He did follow Rutherford intendin' to kill him. But when he saw yore son strike straight across country to the cap-rock, he trailed him to see where he was goin'. Alviro had heard stories."

"You can't tell me anything against my boy. I won't stand for it," broke out the tortured father.

The Ranger looked straight at him. "I'm goin' to tell you no harm of him except that he kept bad company," he said gently. "I reckon you know that already."

"Go on," commanded the father hoarsely.

"Tony followed him to the rim-rock, an' on the way they jumped up the camper, though Alviro did not know it. At the rim-rock Rutherford met two men. Presently another man joined them."

"Who were they?"

"Alviro is n't dead sure. He climbed up to a rock bluff back of them, but it was still dark an' he could n't make them out. Pretty soon Rutherford found out they had a sack of gold. He must have found out where they got it, too."

Underneath the deep tan of his cheeks the old-timer whitened. "So you're tryin' to tell me that my boy was one of the gang that robbed my messenger! An' you're askin' me to believe it on the word of a greaser with a rope around his neck. Is that it?"

"No. They had a quarrel, but yore son bluffed 'em out. They gave the gold to him. He saddled an' rode away with it. On his way back to town he was murdered. So he never got a chance to turn it back to you."

The father of the man who had been killed drew a long, sobbing breath of relief. His clenched fists slowly opened.

"Tony saw all this, did he?"

"Not all of it. Day was comin' on, an' he could n't follow Rutherford right away. Before he got goin' the three men saddled. They trailed along after yore son, an' Tony a mile or so behind 'em. After awhile he heard a shot. He took his time investigatin', because he did n't want to stop any bullets himself. At the foot of Battle Butte he found Rutherford. He had been shot from behind an' flung over the bluff."

The face of the cattleman twitched. "If I can lay my hands on the man or men that did it —"

"Mebbe you can, if you'll give me time. I checked up Tony's story, an' everywhere there was evidence to back it. He had no rifle with him, but I picked up a shell back of some rocks a

hundred yards from where yore son must have been standin' when he was shot. The shell came from a '73. I back-tracked to the night-camp, an' it was just like Tony had said. Four men had been there. One left before the others. You could see the signs where they had trailed him. Once or twice they missed his tracks an' found 'em again. Same way with the single man followin' them. He had taken short-cuts too. Sometimes he blotted out the hoofprints of the three in front, so I know he was not ahead of 'em."

"You think the Dinsmores did this, Jack?"

"I want more evidence before I say so publicly. But Tony did n't. Here's another point in his favor. If Tony shot him on the bluff an' flung the body over, why did he have to go down below an' look at it? No need a-tall of that. No; Tony went down to make sure who it was that had been killed. Soon as he knew that he guessed he would be accused of it, an' he lit out for No Man's Land. I found him there three weeks later."

The cattleman apologized after a fashion for some hard things he had said and thought about his former employee. "I don't spend any of my time likin' yore style, Roberts. You're too high-heeled for me. But I'll say this for you: Ellison picked a good man when he got you. You're a straight-up rider, an' you'll do to take along. What's yore programme?"

He told it. The cattleman looked at him with increased respect. He gave a short, barking laugh.

"If it was anybody else I'd say it was crazy, but you're such a doggoned hellion of a go-getter mebbe you can put it over."

"Looks to me like a good bet," said Roberts mildly.

"Well, I an' my friends will be right there if we're needed. I'll see you through. Can't afford to have my best witness strung up to a wagon-tongue yet awhile."

They talked over the details; then the Ranger started for the jail, and the cattleman breezed around to give a little tip to some reliable friends. Wadley was quite of a mind with Roberts. There was going to be no lynching at Tascosa if he could help it.

CHAPTER XIV

JACK SERVES NOTICE

JACK ROBERTS liked to get his information first hand. On his way to the jail he deflected, passed up the wide, dusty main street, and stopped at a log "hogan" made of *bois d'arc* timber and cedar from the brakes. Across the front of it was printed roughly a sign:

THE SILVER DOLLAR

The Ranger took a little hitch at his guns to make sure they would slide easily from the holsters in case of need, then strolled into the saloon, a picture of negligent indifference.

A tall man, lank as a shad, was master of ceremonies. Steve Gurley was in high feather. He was treating the crowd and was availing himself of his privilege as host to do the bulk of the talking. His theme was the righteousness of mob law, with particular application to the case of Tony Alviro. He talked loudly, as befits one who is a leader of public opinion.

Some wandering of attention in his audience brought him to a pause. He turned, to see the Ranger leaning indolently against the doorjamb. Jack was smiling in the manner of one quietly amused.

"Who invited you here?" demanded Gurley, taken aback, but unwilling to show it.

"Me, I just dropped in to hear yore big talk. Reminds me of old Geronimo. Like you, he gets all filled up with words about every so often and has to steam off. Go ahead, Gurley. Don't let me interrupt you. Make heap oration."

But Gurley's fluency was gone. His cross-eyed glance slid round the room to take stock of his backers. Was this fellow Roberts alone, or had he a dozen Rangers in town with him? He decided to bluff, though with no very great confidence. For into the picture had walked a man, a personality, dynamic and forceful. The outlaw had seen him in action once, and he had been on that occasion as easy to handle as a cageful of panthers.

"Come to see the hangin', have you, Mr. Ranger?"

"Is there goin' to be a hangin'?"

"You betcha — to-night! Git around early, an' you can have a front seat." Gurley added a word of explanation. "No greaser can git biggity an' shoot up our friends without hangin' from the end of a wagon-tongue *pronto*."

"We'll see what a judge an' jury say about it," suggested the Ranger mildly.

"That so? No brindle-thatched guy in buckskin can interfere without sleepin' in smoke. Understand?" The long, sallow man nervously

stroked his hair, which was flattened down on his forehead in a semicircle in the absurd fashion of the day.

"Don't pull on yore picket-pin, Gurley," observed Roberts. "What I say goes. There's goin' to be no hangin' till the courts say so."

A man had come into the saloon by the back door. He was a heavy-set, slouchy man in jeans, broad-shouldered and bowlegged. He laughed grimly. "I don't reckon you can put that over on folks of the short-grass country, young fellow, me lad. We grow man-size, an' I don't expect we'll ask yore say-so when we're ready for business."

Pete Dinsmore had the advantage of his colleague. He knew that Roberts was the only Ranger in town. Also he was of tougher stuff. The leader of the Dinsmore gang would go through.

Into the gray-blue eye of the young man came a look that chilled. "Dinsmore, I'm not here to get into a rookus with you. But I'll serve notice on you right now to keep yore mind off Alviro. He's in the hands of the Texas Rangers. You know what that means."

Dinsmore met the warning with a sneer. "I was hittin' my heels on this range when you was knee-high to a duck, kid. Don't make a mistake. Folks don't make 'em with me twice." He thrust the head on his bull neck forward and dropped a hand to the gun by his side.

The Ranger shook his head. "Not just now, Pete. You're a bad *hombre;* I know that. Some day we're liable to tangle. But it will be in the way of business. While I'm workin' for the State I've got no private feuds."

Jack turned and walked out of the place as casually as he had entered. He knew now that Snark was right. Tascosa meant to hang the Mexican within a few hours.

Evidently Tony had heard the news. He looked up with quick apprehension when Snark opened the door of his cell to admit the Ranger.

"You promise' me fair trial, *señor.* Yet to-day they mean to hang me. Not so?" he cried. The young Mexican was sweating drops of fear.

"That's why I'm here, Tony," answered Jack cheerfully. "The hangin' programme won't go through if you do exactly as I say. I'll stand by you. They'll not get you unless they get me. Is that fair?"

Confidence is born of confidence. Alviro felt himself buttressed by the quiet strength of this vigorous youth. Broader shoulders than his had assumed the responsibility.

"What is it that I am to do?" he asked, his liquid eyes filled with the dumb worship of a dog.

"You're to walk right beside me. No matter how the crowd presses — no matter what it does — stick right there. If you try to run, you're gone. I can't save you. Understand?"

"*Sí, señor.*"

Roberts looked at his watch. "'Most time for the fireworks to begin. You'll wait here till I come back, Tony. I'm goin' to give a little exhibition first. Be with you *pronto.*"

Little beads of sweat gathered again on the forehead of the prisoner. The palms of his hands were hot and moist. He glanced nervously out of the window. Ten minutes before there had been a few lookouts in sight; now there were a hundred men or more. The mob was beginning to gather for the storming of the sod-house. Soon the affairs of Tony Alviro would reach a crisis.

"I — I'll nev' get out alive," said the Mexican in a dry whisper.

The Ranger grinned at him. "Don't worry. If the luck breaks right we'll camp to-night under the stars. If it does n't they'll bury us both, Tony."

In that smile was life for Alviro. It expressed a soul unperturbed, ready for anything that might come up. With this man beside him Tony felt courage flowing back into his heart.

CHAPTER XV

A CLOSE SHAVE

THE Ranger opened the door of the "soddy," stepped through, and closed it behind him. Jeers, threats, bits of advice greeted him from those in front of the jail.

"Better p'int for the hills, Mr. Ranger." . . . "A whole passel of sheriffs can't save the greaser." . . . "Don't you-all try an' stop us if you know what's good for you." . . . "Skedaddle while yore skin's whole." . . . "It's the Mexican, anyhow; it's him an' you too, if you show fight."

The lean-flanked young Ranger looked them over coolly. Men were coming in driblets from the main street. Already perhaps there were a hundred and fifty men and boys in sight. They were the advance guard of the gathering mob.

Never in his gusty lifetime had Jack Roberts been more master of himself. He had that rare temperament which warms to danger. He stood there bareheaded, his crisp, curly bronze hair reflecting the glow of the setting sun, one hand thrust carelessly into his trousers pocket.

"Give up yore prisoner, an' we won't hurt you. We got nothin' against you," a voice cried.

Jack did not answer. His left hand came out of the pocket bringing with it half a dozen silver

dollars. Simultaneously the nose of his revolver flashed into sight. A dollar went up into the air. The revolver cracked. The coin, struck by the bullet in its descent, was flung aside at an angle. Dollar after dollar went up and was hurled from its course as the weapon barked. Out of six shots the Ranger missed only one.

It was marvelous marksmanship, but it did not in the least cow those who saw the exhibition. They were frontiersmen themselves, many of them crack shots, and they knew that one man could do nothing against several hundred. Their taunts followed Roberts as he stepped back into the sod-house.

Jack reloaded his revolver and joined the Mexican. "All ready, Tony. We're off soon as I've put the cuffs on you," he said briskly.

"Don' handcuff me, *señor*. Give me a gun an' a chance for my life," begged Alviro. He was trembling like an aspen leaf in a summer breeze.

The Ranger shook his head. "No, Tony. If you were n't wearin' cuffs they'd think I meant to turn you loose. You would n't have a chance. I'm the law, an' you're my prisoner. That's goin' to help pull us through. Brace up, boy. I've got an ace up my sleeve you don't know about."

A minute later a great yell of triumph rose in the air. The door of the sod-house had opened, and the Ranger and his prisoner stood in front of it. The mob pushed closer, uncertain as to what

its next move would be. Had Roberts brought out the Mexican with the intention of making a merely formal resistance?

Pete Dinsmore, just arrived on the scene at the head of a group from the saloons, shouldered his way to the front.

"We'll take care of yore prisoner now, Mr. Ranger. Much obliged for savin' us the trouble of tearin' down the soddy," he called jubilantly.

"You got more sense an' less grit than I figured you had," jeered Gurley. "Now light a shuck back to Mobeetie an' write a report on it."

Roberts waited, silent and motionless, for the tumult to die. Only his eyes and his brain were active. Homer Dinsmore was in the crowd, well to the front. So were Jumbo Wilkins, Clint Wadley, and half a dozen other line-riders and cowmen, all grouped together to the left. Fifty yards back of them a group of saddled horses waited.

The shouting spent itself. The motionless figure beside the pallid Mexican excited curiosity. Did he mean to give up his prisoner without a fight? That was not the usual habit of the Texas Ranger.

With his left hand Jack drew from a coat-pocket some dark sticks a few inches long. A second time his six-shooter leaped from its scabbard.

"Look out for his cutter!"[1] yelled Gurley.

[1] In the early days in Texas a revolver was sometimes called a "cutter."

The voice of Wadley boomed out harsh and strong, so that every man present heard what he said. "Gad, he's got dynamite!"

The revolvers of the two Dinsmores were already out. They had moved forward a step or two, crouching warily, eyes narrowed and steady. If this brash young Ranger wanted a fight he could have it on the jump. But at Wadley's shout they stopped abruptly. The owner of the A T O was right. The fool officer had several sticks of dynamite in his hand tied together loosely by a string.

The crowd had been edging forward. There was no break in it now, but one could see a kind of uneasy ripple, almost as though it held its mob breath tensely and waited to see what was to come.

"He's got no fuse!" screamed Gurley.

"Here's my fuse," retorted the Ranger. He held up his revolver so that all could see. "I'm goin' to fling this dynamite at the first man who tries to stop me an' hit it while it's in the air close to his head. Come on, Tony. We're on our way."

He moved slowly forward. The Dinsmores stood fast, but the crowd sagged. As the Ranger got closer there was a sudden break. Men began to scramble for safety.

"Look out, Dinsmore," an excited voice cried. It belonged to Jumbo Wilkins. "He'll blow you to hell an' back."

Both of the Dinsmores had a reputation for gameness in a country where the ordinary citizen was of proved courage. With revolvers or rifles they would have fought against odds, had done it more than once. But dynamite was a weapon to which they were not used. It carried with it the terror of an instant death which would leave them no chance to strike back. Very slowly at first, a step at a time, they gave ground.

Roberts, as he moved with his prisoner, edged toward Wadley and his group. He knew he had won, that the big cattleman and his friends would close behind him in apparent slow pursuit, so adroitly as to form a shield between him and the mob and thus prevent a rifle-shot from cutting him down. The horses were in sight scarce half a hundred yards away.

And in the moment of victory he shaved disaster. From the right there came the pad of light, running feet and the rustle of skirts.

"Goddlemighty, it's 'Mona!" cried Wadley, aghast.

It was. Ramona had known that something was in the air when the Ranger and her father held their conference in front of the house. Her aunt had commented on the fact that Clint had taken from the wall a sawed-off shotgun he sometimes carried by his saddle. The girl had waited, desperately anxious, until she could stand suspense no longer. Bareheaded, she had slipped out

of the house and hurried toward the jail in time to see the Ranger facing alone an angry mob. Without thought of danger to herself she had run forward to join him.

Homer Dinsmore gave a whoop of triumph and rushed forward. The Ranger could not play with dynamite when the life of Wadley's daughter was at stake. His brother, Gurley, a dozen others, came close at his heels, just behind Ramona.

The Ranger dropped the black sticks into his pocket and backed away, screening his prisoner as he did so. The ex-Confederate who had come up on the stage was standing beside Wadley. He let out the old yell of his war days and plunged forward.

The Dinsmores bumped into the surprise of their lives. Somehow the man upon whom they had almost laid clutches was out of reach. Between him and them was a line of tough old-timers with drawn guns.

The owner of the A T O handed his sawed-off shotgun to Jumbo Wilkins, caught Ramona round the shoulders with one arm, and ran her hurriedly out of the danger-zone.

Joe Johnston's old trooper pushed the end of his rifle urgently against Homer Dinsmore's ribs. "Doggone it, don't be so rampageous! Keep back ther! This gun 's liable to go off."

"What 's ailin' you?" snarled Gurley. "Ain't you goin' to help us string up the Mexican?"

"No, Steve. Our intentions is otherwise," replied Jumbo with a grin. "An' don't any of you-all come closeter. This sawed-off shotgun of Clint's is loaded with buckshot, an' she spatters all over the State of Texas."

The little posse round the prisoner backed steadily to the left. Not till they were almost at the horses did Dinsmore's mob guess the intentions of the Ranger.

Pete gave a howl of rage and let fly a bullet at Alviro. Before the sound of the shot had died away, the outlaw dropped his revolver with an oath. The accurate answering fire of Roberts had broken his wrist.

"No use, Pete," growled his brother. "They 've got the deadwood on us to-day. But I reckon there are other days comin'."

Homer Dinsmore was right. The mob had melted away like a small snowbank in a hot sun. It was one thing to help lynch a defenseless Mexican; it was quite another to face nine or ten determined men backing the law. Scarce a score of the vigilantes remained, and most of them were looking for a chance to save their faces "without starting anything," as Jumbo put it later.

The lynching-party stood sullenly at a distance and watched the Ranger, his prisoner, and three other men mount the horses. The rest of the posse covered the retreat of the horsemen.

Just before the riders left, Jumbo asked a ques-

tion that had been disturbing him. "Say, Tex, honest Injun, would you 'a' fired off that dynamite if it had come to a showdown?"

Roberts laughed. He drew from his pocket the sticks, tossed them into the air, and took a quick shot with his revolver.

For a moment not a soul in the posse nor one of Dinsmore's watching vigilantes drew a breath. Not one had time to move in self-defense.

The bullet hit its mark. All present saw the little spasmodic jerk of the bundle in the air. But there was no explosion. The dynamite fell harmlessly to the ground.

The old Confederate stepped forward and picked up the bundle. He examined it curiously, then let out a whoop of joyous mirth.

"Nothin' but painted sticks! Son, you're sure a jim-dandy! Take off yore hats, boys, to the man that ran a bluff on the Dinsmore outfit an' made a pair of deuces stick against a royal flush."

He tossed the bits of wood across to Pete Dinsmore, who caught the bundle and looked down at it with a sinister face of evil. This boy had outmaneuvered, outgamed, and outshot him. Dinsmore was a terror in the land, a bad-man known and feared widely. Mothers, when they wanted to frighten their children, warned them to behave, or the Dinsmore gang would get them. Law officers let these outlaws alone on one pretext or another. But lately a company of the Texas

Rangers had moved up into the Panhandle. This young cub had not only thrown down the gauntlet to him; he had wounded him, thwarted him, laughed at him, and made a fool of him. The prestige he had built up so carefully was shaken.

The black eyes of the outlaw blazed in their deep sockets. "By God, young fellow, it's you or me next time we meet. I'll learn you that no scrub Ranger can cross Pete Dinsmore an' get away with it. This ain't the first time you've run on the rope with me. I've had more 'n plenty of you."

The riders were moving away, but Jack Roberts turned in the saddle, one hand on the rump of the bronco.

"It won't be the last time either, Dinsmore. You look like any other cheap cow-thief to me. The Rangers are going to bring law to this country. Tell yore friends they'll live longer if they turn honest men."

The Ranger put spurs to his horse and galloped after his posse.

CHAPTER XVI

WADLEY GOES HOME IN A BUCKBOARD

Clint Wadley took his daughter to the end of the street where his sister lived, blowing her up like a Dutch uncle every foot of the way. The thing she had done had violated his sense of the proprieties and he did not hesitate to tell her so. He was the more unrestrained in his scolding because for a few moments his heart had stood still at the danger in which she had placed herself.

"If you was just a little younger I'd sure enough paddle you. Have n't you been brought up a-tall? Did you grow up like Topsy, without any folks? Don't you know better than to mix up in men's affairs an' git yoreself talked about?" he spluttered.

Ramona hung her head and accepted his reproaches humbly. It was easy for her to believe that she had been immodest and forward in her solicitude. Probably Mr. Roberts — and everybody else, for that matter — thought she could not be a nice girl, since she had been so silly.

"You go home an' stay there," continued Clint severely. "Don't you poke yore head outside the door till I come back. I'll not have you traipsing around this-a-way. Hear me, honey?"

"Yes, Dad," she murmured through the tears that were beginning to come.

"I reckon, when it comes to standin' off a crowd o' hoodlums, I don't need any help from a half-grown little squab like you. I been too easy on you. That 's what ails you."

Ramona had not a word to say for herself. She crept into the house and up to her room, flung herself on the bed and burst into a passion of weeping. Why had she made such an exhibition of herself? She was ashamed in every fiber of her being. Not only had she disgraced herself, but also her father and her aunt.

Meanwhile her father was on his way back downtown. In spite of his years the cattleman was hot-headed. He had something to say to Pete Dinsmore. If it led to trouble Wadley would be more than content, for he believed now that the Dinsmore gang — or some one of them acting in behalf of all — had murdered his son, and he would not rest easy until he had avenged the boy.

The Dinsmores were not at the Silver Dollar nor at the Bird Cage. A lounger at the bar of the latter told the owner of the A T O that they had gone to the corral for their horses. He had heard them say they were going to leave town.

The cattleman followed them to the corral they frequented. Pete Dinsmore was saddling his horse in front of the stable. The others were

not in sight, but a stable boy in ragged jeans was working over some harness near the door.

Dinsmore sulkily watched Wadley approach. He was in a sour and sullen rage. One of the privileges of a "bad-man" is to see others step softly and speak humbly in his presence. But to-day a young fellow scarcely out of his teens had made him look like a fool. Until he had killed Roberts, the chief of the outlaws would never be satisfied, nor would his prestige be what it had been. It had been the interference of Wadley and his crowd that had saved the Ranger from him, and he was ready to vent his anger on the cattleman if he found a good chance.

The outlaw knew well enough that he could not afford to quarrel with the owner of the A T O. There was nothing to gain by it and everything to lose, for even if the cattleman should be killed in a fair fight, the Rangers would eventually either shoot the Dinsmores or run them out of the country. But Pete was beyond reason just now. He was like a man with a toothache who grinds on his sore molar in the intensity of his pain.

"I've come to tell you somethin', Dinsmore," said Wadley harshly.

"Come to apologize for throwin' me down, I reckon. You need n't. I 'm through with you."

" I 'm not through with you. What I want to say is that you 're a dog. No, you 're worse than any hound I ever knew; you 're a yellow wolf."

"What 's that?" cried the bad-man, astounded. His uninjured hand crept to a revolver-butt.

"I believe in my soul that you murdered my boy."

"You 're crazy, man — locoed sure enough. The Mexican —"

"Is a witness against you. When you heard that he had followed Ford that night, you got to worryin'. You did n't know how much he had seen. So you decided to play safe an' lynch him, you hellhound."

"Where did you dream that stuff, Wadley?" demanded Dinsmore, eyes narrowed wrathfully.

"I did n't dream it, any more than I dreamed that you followed Ford from the cap-rock where you hole up, an' shot him from behind at Battle Butte."

"That 's war talk, Wadley. I've just got one word to say to it. You 're a liar. Come a-shootin', soon as you 're ready."

"That 's now."

The cattleman reached for his forty-five, but before he could draw, a shot rang out from the corral. Wadley staggered forward a step or two and collapsed.

Pete did not relax his wariness. He knew that one of the gang had shot Wadley, but he did not yet know how badly the man was hurt. From his place behind the horse he took a couple of left-handed shots across the saddle at the helpless

man. The cattleman raised himself on an elbow, but fell back with a grunt.

The position of Dinsmore was an awkward one to fire from. Without lifting his gaze from the victim, he edged slowly round the bronco.

There was a shout of terror, a sudden rush of hurried feet. The stableboy had flung himself down on Wadley in such a way as to protect the prostrate body with his own.

"Git away from there!" ordered the outlaw, his face distorted with the lust for blood that comes to the man-killer.

"No. You've done enough harm. Let him alone!" cried the boy wildly.

The young fellow was gaunt and ragged. A thin beard straggled over the boyish face. The lips were bloodless, and the eyes filled with fear. But he made no move to scramble for safety. It was plain that in spite of his paralyzing horror he meant to stick where he was.

Dinsmore's lip curled cruelly. He hesitated. This boy was the only witness against him. Why not make a clean job of it and wipe him out too? He fired — and missed; Pete was not an expert left-hand shot.

"Look out, Pete. Men comin' down the road," called the other Dinsmore from the gate of the corral.

Pete looked and saw two riders approaching. It was too late now to make sure of Wadley or

to silence the wrangler. He shoved his revolver back into its place and swung to the saddle.

"Was it you shot Wadley?" he asked his brother.

"Yep, an none too soon. He was reachin' for his six-shooter."

"The fool would have it. Come, let 's burn the wind out of here before a crowd gathers."

Gurley and a fourth man joined them. The four galloped down the road and disappeared in a cloud of white dust.

A moment later Jumbo Wilkins descended heavily from his horse. Quint Sullivan, another rider for the A T O, was with him.

The big line-rider knelt beside his employer and examined the wound. "Hit once — in the side," he pronounced.

"Will — will he live?" asked the white-faced stableboy.

"Don't know. But he 's a tough nut, Clint is. He 's liable to be cussin' out the boys again in a month or two."

Wadley opened his eyes. "You 're damn' whistlin', Jumbo. Get me to my sister's."

Quint, a black-haired youth of twenty, gave a repressed whoop. "One li'l' bit of a lead pill can't faze the boss. They took four or five cracks at him an' did n't hit but once. That 's plumb lucky."

"It would 'a' been luckier if they had n't hit

him at all, Quint," answered Jumbo dryly. "You fork yore hawss, son, an' go git Doc Bridgman. An' you — whatever they call you, Mr. Hawss-rustler — harness a team to that buckboard."

Jumbo, with the expertness of an old-timer who had faced emergencies of this kind before, bound up the wound temporarily. The stable-rustler hitched a team, covered the bottom of the buckboard with hay, and helped Wilkins lift the wounded man to it.

Clint grinned faintly at the white-faced boy beside him. A flicker of recognition lighted his eyes. "You look like you'd seen a ghost, Ridley. Close call for both of us, eh? Lucky that Ranger plugged Dinsmore in the shootin' arm. Pete's no two-gun man. Can't shoot for sour apples with his left hand. Kicked up dust all around us, an' did n't score once."

"Quit yore talkin', Clint," ordered Jumbo.

"All right, Doc." The cattleman turned to Ridley. "Run ahead, boy, an' prepare 'Mona so 's she won't be scared plumb to death. Tell her it 's only a triflin' flesh-wound. Keep her busy fixin' up a bed for me — an' bandages. Don't let her worry. See?"

Ridley had come to town only two days before. Ever since the robbery he had kept a lone camp on Turkey Creek. There was plenty of game for the shooting, and in that vast emptiness of space he could nurse his wounded self-respect. But he

had run out of flour and salt. Because Tascosa was farther from the A T O ranch than Clarendon he had chosen it as a point to buy supplies. The owner of the corral had offered him a job, and he had taken it. He had not supposed that Ramona was within a hundred miles of the spot. The last thing in the world he wanted was to meet her, but there was no help for it now.

Her aunt carried to Ramona the word that a man was waiting outside with a message from her father. When she came down the porch steps, there were still traces of tear-stains on her cheeks. In the gathering dusk she did not at first recognize the man at the gate. She moved forward doubtfully, a slip of a slender-limbed girl, full of the unstudied charm and grace of youth.

Halfway down the path she stopped, her heart beating a little faster. Could this wan and ragged man with the unkempt beard be Art Ridley, always so careful of his clothes and his personal appearance? She was a child of impulse. Her sympathy went out to him with a rush, and she streamed down the path to meet him. A strong, warm little hand pressed his. A flash of soft eyes irradiated him. On her lips was the tender smile that told him she was still his friend.

"Where in the world have you been?" she cried. "And what have you been doing to yourself?"

His blood glowed at the sweetness of her generosity.

"I've been — camping."

With the shyness and the boldness of a child she pushed home her friendliness. "Why don't you ever come to see a fellow any more?"

He did not answer that, but plunged at his mission. "Miss Ramona, I've got bad news for you. Your father has been hurt — not very badly, I think. He told me to tell you that the wound was only a slight one."

'Mona went white to the lips. "How?" she whispered.

"The Dinsmores shot him. The men are bringing him here."

He caught her in his arms as she reeled. For a moment her little head lay against his shoulder and her heart beat against his.

"A trifling flesh-wound, your father called it," went on Ridley. "He said you were to get a bed ready for him, and fix bandages."

She steadied herself and beat back the wave of weakness that had swept over her.

"Yes," she said. "I'll tell Aunt. Have they sent for the doctor?"

"Quint Sullivan went."

A wagon creaked. 'Mona flew into the house to tell her aunt, and out again to meet her father. Her little ankles flashed down the road. Agile as a boy, she climbed into the back of the buckboard.

"Oh, Dad!" she cried in a broken little voice,

and her arms went round him in a passion of love.

He was hurt worse than he was willing to admit to her.

"It's all right, honey-bug. Doc Bridgman will fix me up fine. Yore old dad is a mighty live sinner yet."

Ridley helped Jumbo carry the cattleman into the house. As he came out, the doctor passed him going in.

Ridley slipped away in the gathering darkness and disappeared.

CHAPTER XVII

OLD-TIMERS

As soon as Captain Ellison heard of what had happened at Tascosa, he went over on the stage from Mobeetie to look at the situation himself. He dropped in at once to see his old friends the Wadleys. Ramona opened the door to him.

"Uncle Jim!" she cried, and promptly disappeared in his arms for a hug and a kiss.

The Ranger Captain held her off and examined the lovely flushed face.

"Dog it, you get prettier every day you live. I wisht I was thirty years younger. I'd make some of these lads get a move on 'em."

"I wish you were," she laughed. "They need some competition to make them look at me. None of them would have a chance then — even if they wanted it."

"I believe that. I got to believe it to keep my self-respect. It 's all the consolation we old-timers have got. How 's Clint?"

"Better. You should hear him swear under his breath because the doctor won't let him smoke more than two pipes a day, and because we won't let him eat whatever he wants to. He 's worse than a sore bear," said Ramona proudly.

"Lead me to him."

A moment later the Ranger and the cattleman were shaking hands. They had been partners in their youth, had fought side by side in the Civil War, and had shot plains Indians together at Adobe Walls a few years since. They were so close to each other that they could quarrel whenever they chose, which they frequently did.

"How, old-timer!" exclaimed the Ranger Captain.

"Starved to death. They feed me nothin' but slops — soup an' gruel an' custard an' milk-toast. Fine for a full-grown man, ain't it? Jim, you go out an' get me a big steak an' cook it in boilin' grease on a camp-fire, an' I'll give you a deed to the A T O."

"To-morrow, Clint. The Doc says —"

"*Mañana!* That's what they all say. Is this Mexico or God's country? What I want, I want now."

"You always did — an' you 'most always got it too," said Ellison, his eyes twinkling reminiscently.

'Mona shook a warning finger at her father. "Well, he won't get it now. He'll behave, too, or he'll not get his pipe to-night."

The sick man grinned. "See how she bullies a poor old man, Jim. I'm worse than that Lear fellow in the play — most henpecked father you ever did see."

"Will she let you talk?"

"He may talk to you, Uncle Jim."

"What did I tell you?" demanded the big cattleman from the bed with the mock bitterness that was a part of the fun they both enjoyed. "You see, I got to get her permission. I'm a slave."

"That 's what a nurse is for, Clint. You want to be glad you got the sweetest one in Texas." The Captain patted Ramona affectionately on the shoulder before he passed to the business of the day. "I want to know about all these ructions in Tascosa. Tell me the whole story."

They told him. He listened in silence till they had finished, asked a question or two, and made one comment.

"That boy Roberts of mine is sure some go-getter."

"He'll do," conceded the cattleman. "That lucky shot of his — the one that busted Dinsmore's arm — certainly saved my life later."

"Lucky shot!" exploded Ellison. "And you just through tellin' me how he plugged the dollars in the air! Doggone it, I want you to know there was no darned luck about it! My boys are the best shots in Texas."

"I'll take any one of 'em on soon as I'm out — any time, any place, any mark," retorted Wadley promptly.

"I'll go you. Roberts is a new man an' has n't had much experience. I'll match him with you."

"New man! H'mp! He 's the best you 've got, an' you know it."

"I don't know whether he is, but he 's good enough to make any old-timer like you look like a plugged nickel."

The cattleman snorted again, disdaining an answer.

"Dad is the best shot in Texas," pronounced Ramona calmly, rallying to her father's support. For years she had been the umpire between the two.

The Captain threw up his hands. "I give up."

"And Mr. Roberts is just about as good."

"That 's settled, then," said Ellison. "But what I came to say is that I 'm goin' to round up the Dinsmore bunch. We can't convict 'em of murder on the evidence we have, but I 'll arrest 'em for shootin' you an' try to get a confession out of one of 'em. Does that look reasonable, Clint?"

Wadley considered this.

"It 's worth a try-out. The Dinsmores are game. They won't squeal. But I've a sneakin' notion Gurley is yellow. He might come through — or that other fellow Overstreet might. I don't know him. You want to be careful how you try to take that outfit, though, Jim. They 're dangerous as rattlesnakes."

"That 's the kind of outfit my boys eat up," answered the chipper little officer as he rose to leave. "Well, so long, Clint. Behave proper, an'

mebbe this young tyrant will give you a nice stick o' candy for a good boy."

He went out chuckling.

The cattleman snorted. "Beats all how crazy Jim is about those Ranger boys of his. He thinks the sun rises an' sets by them. I want to tell you they've got to sleep on the trail a long time an' get up early in the mo'nin' to catch the Dinsmores in bed. That bird Pete always has one eye open. What's more, he an' his gang wear their guns low."

"I don't think Uncle Jim ought to send boys like Jack Roberts out against such desperadoes. It's not fair," Ramona said decisively.

"Oh, ain't it?" Her father promptly switched to the other side. "You give me a bunch of boys like young Roberts, an' I'd undertake to clean up this whole country, an' Lincoln County too. He's a dead shot. He's an A-1 trailer. He can whip his weight in wildcats. He's got savvy. He uses his brains. An' he's game from the toes up. What more does a man need?"

"I did n't know you liked him," his daughter said innocently.

"Like him? Jumpin' snakes, no! He's too darned fresh to suit me. What's likin' him got to do with it? I'm just tellin' you that no better officer ever stood in shoe-leather."

"Oh, I see."

Ramona said no more. She asked herself no

questions as to the reason, but she knew that her father's words of praise were sweet to hear. They sent a warm glow of pride through her heart. She wanted to think well of this red-haired Ranger who trod the earth as though he were the heir of all the ages. In some strange way Fate had linked his life with hers from that moment when he had literally flung himself in her path to fight a mad bull for her life.

CHAPTER XVIII

A SHOT OUT OF THE NIGHT

RAMONA sat on the porch in the gathering darkness. She had been reading aloud to her father, but he had fallen asleep beside her in his big armchair. During these convalescent days he usually took a nap after dinner and after supper. He called it forty winks, but to an unprejudiced listener the voice of his slumber sounded like a sawmill in action.

The gate clicked, and a man walked up the path. He did not know that the soft eyes of the girl, sitting in the porch shadows, lit with pleasure at sight of him. Nothing in her voice or in her greeting told him so.

He took off his hat and stood awkwardly with one booted foot on the lowest step.

"I came to see Mr. Wadley," he presently explained, unaccountably short of small talk.

She looked at her father and laughed. The saw was ripping through a series of knots in alternate crescendo and diminuendo. "Shall I wake him? He likes to sleep after eating. I think it does him good."

"Don't you! I'll come some other time."

"Could n't you wait a little? He does n't usually sleep long." The girl suggested it hospitably.

His embarrassment relieved any she might otherwise have felt.

"I reckon not."

At the end of that simple sentence he stuck, and because of it Jack Roberts blushed. It was absurd. There was no sense in it, he told himself. It never troubled him to meet men. He had n't felt any shyness when there had been a chance to function in action for her. But now he was all feet and hands before this slip of a girl. Was it because of that day when she had come flying between him and the guns of Dinsmore's lynching-party? He wanted to thank her, to tell her how deeply grateful he had been for the thought that had inspired her impulse. Instead of which he was, he did not forget to remind himself later, as expressive as a bump on a log.

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Ridley?" she asked.

"No, miss. He saved yore father's life from Pete Dinsmore. I reckon you know that."

"Yes. I saw him for a moment. Poor boy! I think he is worrying himself sick. If you meet him will you tell him that everything 's all right. Dad would like to see him."

Their voices had dropped a note in order not to waken her father. For the same reason she had come down the steps and was moving with him toward the gate.

If Jack had known how to say good-bye they

would probably have parted at the fence, but he was not socially adequate for the business of turning his back gracefully on a young woman and walking away. As he backed from her he blurted out what was in his mind.

"I gotta thank you for — for buttin' in the other day, Miss Ramona."

She laughed, quite at her ease now. Why is it that the most tender-hearted young women like to see big two-fisted men afraid of them?

"Oh, you thought I was buttin' in," she mocked, tilting a gay challenge of the eyes at him.

"I roped the wrong word, miss. I — I thought —"

What he thought was never a matter of record. She had followed him along the fence to complete his discomfiture and to enjoy her power to turn him from an efficient man into a bashful hobbledehoy.

"Father gave me an awful scolding. He said I did n't act like a lady."

"He 's 'way off," differed Jack hotly.

She shook her head. "No. You see I could n't explain to everybody there that I did it for — for Rutherford — because I did n't want anything so dreadful as that poor Mexican's death on his account. Dad said some of the men might think I did it — oh, just to be showing off," she finished untruthfully.

"Nobody would think that — nobody but a plumb idjit. I think you did fine."

Having explained satisfactorily that she had not interfered for his sake, there was really no occasion for Ramona to linger. But Jack had found his tongue at last and the minutes slipped away.

A sound in the brush on the far side of the road brought the Ranger to attention. It was the breaking of a twig. The foot that crushed it might belong to a cow or a horse. But Roberts took no chances. If some one was lying in wait, it was probably to get him.

"Turn round an' walk to the house," he ordered the girl crisply. "Sing 'Swanee River' as you go. Quick!"

There was a note in his voice that called for obedience. Ramona turned, a flurry of fear in her heart. She did not know what there was to be afraid of, but she was quite sure her companion had his reason. The words of the old plantation song trembled from her lips into the night.

A dozen yards behind her Jack followed, backing toward the house. His six-shooter was in his hand, close to his side.

He flashed one look backward. The parlor was lit up and Clint Wadley was lying on a lounge reading a paper. He was a tempting mark for anybody with a grudge against him.

Jack took the last twenty yards on the run. He plunged into the parlor on the heels of Ramona.

Simultaneously came the sound of a shot and of breaking glass. Wadley jumped up, in time to see the Ranger blow out the lamp. Jack caught Ramona by the shoulders and thrust her down to her knees in a corner of the room.

"What in blue blazes —?" Clint began to demand angrily.

"Keep still," interrupted Jack. "Some one 's bushwhackin' either you or me."

He crept to the window and drew down the blind. A small hole showed where the bullet had gone through the window and left behind it a star of shattered glass.

Ramona began to whimper. Her father's arm found and encircled her. "It 's all right, honey. He can't git us now."

"I 'm goin' out by the back door. Mebbe I can put salt on this bird's tail," said Jack. "You stay right where you are, Mr. Wadley. They can't hit either of you in that corner."

"Oh, don't! Please don't go!" wailed the girl.

Her words were a fillip to the Ranger. They sent a glow through his blood. He knew that at that moment she was not thinking of the danger to herself.

"Don't you worry. I'll swing round on him wide. Ten to one he 's already hittin' the dust fast to make his get-away."

He slipped out of the room and out of the

house. So slowly did he move that it was more than an hour before he returned to them.

"I guessed right," he told the cattleman. "The fellow hit it up at a gallop through the brush. He 's ten miles from here now."

"Was he after me or you?"

"Probably me. The Rangers ain't popular with some citizens. Looks to me like Steve Gurley's work."

"I would n't be a Ranger if I was you. I'd resign," said Ramona impulsively.

"Would you?" Jack glanced humorously at Wadley. "I don't expect yore father would indorse them sentiments, Miss Ramona. He'd tell me to go through."

Clint nodded. " 'Mona said you wanted to see me about somethin'."

The young man showed a little embarrassment. The cattleman guessed the reason. He turned to his daughter.

"Private business, honey."

Ramona kissed her father good-night and shook hands with Jack. When they were alone the Ranger mentioned the reason for his call.

"It 's goin' around that Pete Dinsmore claims to have somethin' on Rutherford. The story is that he says you'd better lay off him or he'll tell what he knows."

The eyes of the cattleman winced. Otherwise he gave no sign of distress.

"I've got to stand the gaff, Jack. He can't blackmail me, even if the hound cooks up some infernal story about Ford. I hate it most on 'Mona's account. It'll hurt the little girl like sixty."

Jack was of that opinion too, but he knew that Wadley's decision not to throw his influence to shield the Dinsmores was the right one.

"She thought a heap o' Ford, 'Mona did," the cattleman went on. "He was all she had except me. The boy was wild. Most young colts are. My fault. I made things too easy for him — gave him too much money to spend. But outside of bein' wild he was all right. I'd hate to have her hear anything against him." He sighed. "Well, I reckon what must be must."

"Stories the Dinsmores tell won't count with honest folks. Pete is one bad *hombre*. Everybody will know why he talks — if he does. That's a big *if* too. He knows we've got evidence to tie his gang up with the killin' of Ford. He does n't know how much. Consequence is he 'll not want to raise any question about the boy. We might come back at him too strong."

"Mebbeso." Wadley looked at the Ranger and his gaze appraised Roberts a man among men. He wished that he had been given a son like this. "Boy, you kept yore wits fine to-night. That idea of makin' 'Mona walk alone to the house an' keepin' her singin' so 's a bushwhacker could n't

make any mistake an' think she was a man was a jim-dandy."

The Ranger rose. He had not the same difficulty in parting from Wadley or any other man that he found in making his adieux to a woman. He simply reached for his hat, nodded almost imperceptibly, and walked out of the house.

CHAPTER XIX

TRAPPED

THE territory which Captain Ellison had to cover to find the Dinsmore gang was as large as Maine. Over this country the buffalo-hunter had come and gone; the cattleman was coming and intended to stay. Large stretches of it were entirely uninhabited; here and there sod or adobe houses marked where hardy ranchers had located on the creeks; and in a few places small settlements dotted the vast prairies.

There were in those days three towns in the Panhandle. If you draw a line due east from Tascosa, it will pass very close to Mobeetie, a hundred miles away. Clarendon is farther to the south. In the seventies Amarillo was only what Jumbo Wilkins would have called "a whistlin'-post in the desert," a place where team outfits camped because water was handy. The official capital of the Panhandle was Mobeetie, the seat of government of Wheeler County, to which were attached for judicial purposes more than a score of other counties not yet organized or even peopled.

To the towns of the Panhandle were drifting in cowboys, freighters, merchants, gamblers, cattle outfits, and a few rustlers from Colorado, New

Mexico, and the more settled parts of Texas. They were the hardier sons of an adventurous race, for each man had to make good his footing by his own strength. At first there had been no law except that which lay in the good-will of men, and the holster by their side. The sheriff of Wheeler County had neither the deputies nor the financial backing to carry justice into the mesquite. Game gunmen served as marshals in the towns, but these had no authority on the plains. Until Captain Ellison and his little company of Rangers moved into the district there had been no way of taking law into the chaparral. The coming of these quiet men in buckskin was notice to the bad-man that murder and robbery were not merely pleasant pastimes.

Yet it would be easy to overstate the lawlessness of the Panhandle. There were bad men. Every frontier of civilization has them. But of all the great cattle country which stretched from Mexico to the Canadian line none had a finer or more orderly citizenry than this. The country was notably free of the bloodshed which drenched such places as Dodge City to the east or Lincoln County, New Mexico, to the west of the Panhandle.

Ellison wanted the Dinsmores, not because he believed he could yet hang any serious crime on them but for the moral effect upon them and the community. Clint Wadley had gone looking for

trouble and had been wounded in consequence. No Texas jury would convict on that count. But it was not a conviction the fire-eating little Captain wanted just now. He intended to show that his boys could go out and arrest the Dinsmores or any other lawbreakers, whenever the occasion called for it. It might take them a week or a month or six months, but they would bag their game in the end. The rule of the Texas Rangers was to sleep on a man's trail until they found him.

The Captain stationed a man at each of the three towns. He sent two on a scouting-trip through No Man's Land, and two more to search Palo Duro Cañon. He watched the stages as they went and came, questioned mule-skinners with freight outfits, kept an eye on *tendejóns* and feed-corrals. And at the end of three weeks he had no results whatever to show, except a sarcastic note from Pete Dinsmore complimenting him on his force of Rangers.

The Captain was furious, but not a whit discouraged.

"Dog it, we'll fight it out on this line if it takes all summer," he told Lieutenant Hawley, his second in command.

To them came Jack Roberts with a proposition. "I've found out that Homer Dinsmore has a girl in Tascosa. She's a Mexican. I know about her through Tony Alviro. It seems she's a cousin of

Bonita, the girl Tony is going to marry. About once a week Dinsmore rides into town at night, ties his horse in the brush back of her house, and goes in to see her. If you say so, Chief, I'll make it my business to be there when he comes."

"Need any help, do you reckon?"

"No. I'll have to hide out in the mesquite. One man will be better on that job than two."

"All right, son. You know yore job. Get him."

That was all the warrant Jack wanted or needed. He returned to Tascosa and made his preparations.

Every night after dark he slipped out of town by the north road till he was on the open prairie, then swung round in a semicircle skirting the lights of the settlement. He had arranged a blind in the brush from which he could see the back of the Menendez "soddy." Occasionally he comforted himself with a cautiously smoked cigarette, but mostly he lay patiently watching the trap that was to lure his prey. At one o'clock each morning he rose, returned on his beat, went to bed, and fell instantly asleep.

On the fifth night there was a variation of the programme.

It was between nine and ten o'clock that Jack heard the hoot of an owl. He sat up instantly, eyes and ears keyed for action.

The back door of the sod-house opened, and through the night stillness floated the faint strum-

ming of a guitar. Jack did not doubt that it was the answering signal to show that all was safe.

A man crept forward from the mesquite and disappeared inside the house.

Through the brush the Ranger snaked his way to the point from which the hooting of the owl had come. A bronco was tethered to a bush. An examination showed that the horse had been ridden far, but not too fast.

Jack was satisfied the man had come alone.

A faint trail wound in and out among the mesquite and the cactus to the house. Beside this trail, behind a clump of prickly pear, the Ranger sat down and waited. The hour-hand of his watch crept to ten, to eleven, to twelve. Roberts rose occasionally, stretched himself to avoid any chance of cramped muscles, and counted stars by way of entertainment. He had spent more diverting evenings, but there was a good chance that the fag end of this one would be lively enough to compensate.

Shortly after midnight a shaft of light reached out from the house into the desert. The back door had opened. A woman came out, took a few steps forward, peered about her, and called that all was clear. A man followed. The two stood talking for a minute in low tones; then the man kissed her and turned briskly toward the brush. According to the Ranger's programme the girl should have returned to the house, but instead she waited in

the moonlight to see the last of her lover. When he waved an arm to her and cried "*Buenas noches, chachita,*" she threw him a kiss across the starlit prairie.

Intent on his good-night, the man missed the ill-defined trail that led to his horse and zig-zagged through the brush at another angle. The Ranger, light-footed as a cat, moved forward noiselessly to intercept him, crouching low and taking advantage of all the cover he could find. Luck was with him. Dinsmore strode within a yard of the kneeling man without a suspicion of danger.

A powerful forearm slid out from the brush. Sinewy fingers caught the far ankle of the moving man. One strong pull sent Dinsmore off his balance. The outlaw clutched wildly at the air and came crashing down. He fell into a bush of cat-claw cactus.

The Ranger was on him like a wildcat. Before his victim could make a move to defend himself, Jack had the man handcuffed with his arms behind him.

Dinsmore, his face in the catclaw, gave a smothered cry for help. From where he was, the Ranger could not see the house, but he heard the excited voice of the woman, the sound of a commotion, and the beat of rapid footsteps.

An excited voice called: "*Quién es?*"

The trapped man wanted to explain, but his

captor rubbed the face of the outlaw deeper into the torturing spines of the cactus.

"Don't ask any questions," advised Roberts. "Get back into the house *pronto*. The Rangers have taken Dinsmore. Unless you're lookin' for trouble, you'd better *vamos*."

Evidently two or three Mexicans had run out to the rescue. Jack could hear them discussing the situation in whispers. He had them at a double disadvantage. They did not know how many Rangers lay in the mesquite; nor did they want to fall foul of them in any case. The men drew back slowly, still in excited talk among themselves, and disappeared inside the house. The woman protested volubly and bitterly till the closing of the door stifled her voice.

Jack pulled his prisoner to a more comfortable position.

"Sorry you fell into the catclaw, Dinsmore," he said. "If you'll stand hitched, I'll draw the spine from your face."

The man cursed him savagely.

"All right," said the Ranger amiably. "If you want 'em as souvenirs, I'll not object. Suits me if it does you. We'll go now."

He tied to the handcuffs the end of the lariat which was attached to the saddle. The other end he fastened to the pommel.

"I'll not go a step with you," growled Dinsmore.

"Oh, yes, you'd better step along. I'd hate to have to drag you through this brush. It 's some rough."

The Ranger swung to the saddle. The bronco answered the pressure of the rider's knee and began to move. The lariat jerked tight. Sullenly Dinsmore yielded.

But his spirit was unbroken. As he stumbled along in front of the horse, he filled the night with raucous oaths.

"Take these cuffs off'n me and come down from that horse," he stormed. "Do that, and I'll beat off yore head."

The man on horseback smiled. "You're the laziest fellow I ever did see, Dinsmore," he drawled. "The last fellow that licked me pulled me from the saddle."

"Just let me get a lick at you," pleaded the outlaw. "I'll give you that bronc you're ridin' if you'll stand up to me man to man."

"Can't do it. I'm here for business an' not for pleasure. Sorry."

"You've got no right to arrest me. What 's the charge?"

"I've forgot whether it 's brand-burning, highway robbery, murder, or mayhem — any old crime would fit you."

"You've got no evidence."

"Mebbeso, mebbe not," answered the Ranger lightly. "Cap Ellison said he'd like to have a

squint at you, anyhow, so I said I'd fetch you along. No trouble a-tall to show goods."

The outlaw bared his tobacco-stained teeth in a sudden fury of rage. "Some day I'll gun you right for this."

The narrow-loined youth with the well-packed shoulders looked down at him, and the eyes of the officer were hard and steady as steel.

"Dinsmore," he said, "we're goin' to put you an' yore outfit out o' business in the Panhandle. Your day is done. You've run on the rope long enough. I'll live to see you hanged — an' soon."

CHAPTER XX

KIOWAS ON THE WARPATH

Jack Roberts did not leave town inconspicuously with his prisoner in the middle of the night. He made instead a public exit, for Captain Ellison wanted to show the Panhandle that the law could reach out and get the Dinsmores just as it could any other criminals. With his handcuffed captive on a horse beside him, the Ranger rode down to the post-office just before the stage left. Already the word had spread that one of the Dinsmores had been taken by an officer. Now the town gathered to see the notorious "bad-man" and his tamer.

Dinsmore faced the curious crowd with a defiant sneer, but he was burning with rage and humiliation. He and his crowd had carried things with a high hand. They were not only outlaws; they were "bad-men" in the frontier sense of the word. They had shot down turbulent citizens who disputed their sway. Pete and Homer especially had won reputations as killers, and game men sidestepped them rather than deny their claims. Yet twice within a month this smooth-faced boy had crossed their path and bested them. The pride of Homer Dinsmore was galled to the quick. He would have given all he had to

"get a lick at" the Ranger now before all these people.

Tascosa watched the young officer and his captive from a distance. The townsfolk offered no audible comment on the situation, either by way of approval or disapproval. The fear of the outlaws had been too long over them. This was not the end of the matter. It was still a good betting proposition that some one of the gang would "get" this jaunty youth before he was much older.

But it is certain that the arrest he had made single-handed had its effect. It is inevitable that a frontier camp shall some day discard its wild youth and put on the sobriety of a settled community. Was this time at hand for the Panhandle?

A rider galloped out of town after the horsemen. The Ranger turned to face him and made sure that the rifle beneath his leg would slip easily from its scabbard. An attempt at a rescue was always a possibility on the cards.

The man drew his cow-pony up beside them.

"'Evenin', Mr. Man-in-a-Hurry. Lookin' for anybody in particular?" asked the red-haired Ranger, his chill eyes fixed on the stranger.

"For you. I want to help guard your prisoner to Mobeetie."

"Much obliged," answered Roberts dryly. "Am I needin' help?"

"You may. You've got to sleep. Let me ride with you."

The brain of Jack Roberts began to register a memory. This young fellow was in ragged jeans and a butternut shirt. His hair was long and unkempt. He looked haggard and ill-fed. But he was the same youth the Ranger had glimpsed for a moment in the bravery of fine clothes and gay address on the day of the bulldogging. Jack remembered his promise to Ramona Wadley.

"Fine! Come along. We'll take watch and watch through the night," he told the boy.

Homer Dinsmore's teeth drew back in a derisive snarl. "Want company again on the trip so 's you won't be robbed, Mr. Ridley?"

The Easterner did not answer, but color flushed his face at the taunt.

Roberts offered a comment on his behalf:

"Ridley was young then. He 's gettin' older every day. I notice he did n't ask for company when he flung himself down over Clint Wadley's body to protect it from the bullets of a killer."

All afternoon they followed the Canadian River as it wound to the east. They made camp beside it at night, cooking the coffee on a fire of buffalo chips. Jerked beef and hardtack, washed down with coffee, was their fare.

Dinsmore had fallen into a sullen silence, but the other two carried on desultory talk. The two young fellows were not very comfortable in each

other's society; they did not understand the mental habits of each other. But Jack maintained a cheerful friendliness to which Arthur responded gratefully. Behind the curtain of their talk was a girl. The spell of her was on them both. Each of them could see her in the coals of the fire, light-footed and slim, with shy eyes tender and shining. But neither of them drew the curtain to their deeper thoughts.

After they had eaten, the Ranger handcuffed his prisoner and pegged him down loosely. He put out the fire, for he did not want the location of the camp to be betrayed by smoke. He gave Ridley the first watch — because it was the easier of the two. With a saddle for a pillow and a slicker for a blanket, he lay down beneath the stars and fell asleep. Once, in his dreams, he thought he heard the sound of beating drums. When he wakened at the time set, the night was still. The prisoner was sound asleep, and Ridley, propped against his saddle, was keeping vigilant watch.

Robert mentioned his fancy about the drums.

Arthur smiled. "Before Dinsmore turned over he was snoring like a far-away thunder-storm. I expect that 's what you heard."

Jack roused the others as soon as the promise of day was in the sky. By sunup they were ready to travel.

There was a bluff back of the camp that gave an outlook over the country. The Ranger left his

prisoner in the care of Arthur while he climbed to its summit for a glance up and down the river. He knew that the Mexican girl would get word to the friends of her sweetheart that he had been arrested. There was a chance that they might already be close. Anyhow, it would do no harm to see. If he had not taken that precaution undoubtedly all three of the party would have been dead inside of half an hour.

For the first sweeping glance of the Ranger showed him a tragedy. The valley was filled with Indians. Apparently as yet they did not know that any white men were in the neighborhood, for the smoke was beginning to rise from morning fires. In a little pocket, just off from the camp, their ponies were herded. At the opposite side were a dozen ox-wagons grouped together in a circle to form a corral. The tongue of the nearest wagon was propped up by a yoke, and across it was the naked body of a man who had been crucified and tortured. The other drivers of the freight outfit were nowhere in sight. Either they were lying dead behind the wagons, or they had escaped on horseback.

The Ranger drew back at once from the bluff. He knew that probably he had been seen by the Indian lookouts; if he and his party were going to get away, it must be done quickly. He ran down the hill to his companions.

"Indians — Kiowas — hundreds of them," he

explained. "They've captured a freight outfit and killed the drivers. We'll cross the river below their camp if we can." As he spoke, he was busy unlocking the handcuffs of the prisoner. To Dinsmore he gave a revolver.

It seemed to Ridley that his heart was pumping water. Death with torture was the punishment given captives by the plains Indians. He knew he must be ghastly white, but he said nothing.

The three men rode out of the ravine to the river. Already they could hear the yelling of the Kiowas a few hundred yards above. A moment later they caught sight of the savages pouring down the bank. Those in front were on foot. Others farther back, on the round-bellied Indian ponies, were galloping to catch up.

Half a mile farther down, there was a break in the river-bank which offered a better chance for crossing. The stream there broadened, cut in two by a little island. The three riders gained on their pursuers. Bullets whistled past them, but they did not stop to exchange shots. When they reached the place Jack had chosen to cross, they were four or five hundred yards ahead of the leading Indians.

They splashed into the water. Here it was shallow, but along the edge of the island the current was running swift. The Kiowas, following the fugitives down the bank, kept up a scattering fire.

The bullets struck the water on all sides of the three moving targets. Arthur was on the right, closest to the Indians. A little ahead of him was Dinsmore. Farther over, the Ranger's horse was already breasting the deep water.

Roberts heard young Ridley cry: "He's hit!"

The Ranger turned his head. His prisoner was sagging in the saddle. Arthur was riding beside the wounded man and trying to support him.

Jack drew up his horse, holding it strongly against the current, until the others were abreast of him.

"We've got to swim for it," he called across to Ridley. "I'll get him if he slips out of the saddle before we reach shore."

The horses swam side by side. Roberts encouraged Dinsmore, riding knee to knee with him. "Just a little way now. Stick it out.... We're right close to the bank.... Grab the horn tight."

As Dinsmore slid into the water Jack caught him by the hair of the head. The swift water, racing fast round the shoulder of the island, tugged mightily at him. But the body of the Ranger's horse was a barrier to keep the unconscious man from being swept downstream, and the fingers of the rider clung to the thick black hair like steel clamps.

They reached shallow water. The Ranger swung from the saddle and carried Dinsmore up through

the thicket that edged the bank. The horses clambered up without guidance, and Ridley drove them into the big rocks, where they would be better protected from the shots of the Indians.

The Ranger chose the best cover available near the head of the island and put the wounded man down gently on the ground. Already the Kiowas were halfway across the river. Jack counted twenty of them on horseback in the water.

"Can you shoot?" he asked his companion.

Ridley was behind a rock around which bushes grew thick. "B-better than I could." He was shaking with excitement.

"You can't miss 'em. We've got 'em right this time."

Jack fired. An Indian plunged headfirst into the water like a stone from a sling. A moment later his body could be seen swirling in the swift current. A second shot shook the death scream from the throat of another brave.

Twice Arthur missed.

"You've got buck-fever. Try for the horses," suggested the Texan. A moment later he gave a little whoop of encouragement. The naked shining body of a Kiowa had collapsed on the bare back of a pony. Ridley at last had scored.

Instantly the nervousness of the Easterner disappeared. His shooting had not the deadly accuracy of Roberts, but he was a good marks-

man, and at this close-range work his forty-five-seventy did clean work.

The Texan did not miss a shot. He picked the leaders and took his time. A third, a fourth, and a fifth brave went sliding from the backs of the swimming ponies.

The Kiowas broke under the deadly fire. Those not yet in the deep water turned and made for the shore from which they had come. The others gave with the current and drifted past the island, their bodies hanging from the far side of the ponies.

The whites on the island shot at the horses. More than one redskin, unable to get out of the current after his pony had been shot, floated down the river for miles before the body was found by his tribe.

"We got either nine or ten," said the Ranger. "They'll never try another attack from that bank. Probably they'll surround the island to starve us."

He put down his rifle and opened the shirt of the wounded man. Dinsmore had been shot in the back, above the heart. Jack washed out the wound and bound it up as best he could. The outlaw might live, or he might not — assuming that the party would escape from the savages.

Jack knew that this was an assumption not likely to be fulfilled. His guess was that there were four or five hundred of the Kiowas. They would

immediately post a line of guards on both sides of the river. There was a chance that a man on a fast horse might make a get-away if he left at once. He proposed to Ridley that he try this.

"Will you go too?" asked Arthur.

The Ranger shook his head. "Got to stay with my prisoner."

"I'll stay too."

"If you were to make it, you could send me help."

"Think I could get away?"

The Westerner pointed to two Indians who were swimming the river below out of rifle-shot. "I doubt it. You might fight yore way through, but they'd likely get you."

"I'll stick it out here, then."

In his heart Arthur knew that he was not staying to face the danger with the Texan. When once he had got over his panic, he had fought coolly enough under the eye of his companion, but he lacked the stark courage to face the chances of that long ride alone for help.

"I reckon it's too late, anyhow," agreed Roberts. He shrugged his shoulders. "It 's a toss-up, either way. But we'll sure send a few to their happy hunting-grounds before we take our long journey."

"You think —" Arthur let his fear-filled eyes finish the question.

The Ranger smiled wryly. "Yore guess is as

good as mine. I'll say this: I've been in tight holes before an' came through O. K. I'll back my luck to stand up this time too."

Arthur looked into the brown face of this spare, clear-eyed youth and felt that he would give his hopes of heaven for such gameness. They had not one chance in ten thousand to escape, but the sheer nerve of the boy held him as cool and easy as though he were sauntering down the main street at Clarendon.

CHAPTER XXI

TEX TAKES A LONG WALK

EXCEPT for desultory firing the Kiowas left the islanders alone for the rest of the day. The fever of the wounded man mounted. Most of the time he was out of his head, and in tossing to and fro was continually disturbing the cold-water bandages applied by the Texan.

As soon as night had fallen, Roberts put a proposition to his companion. "One of us has got to go for help. Take yore choice, Ridley. Will you go or stay?"

The Easterner felt as though his heart had been drenched in ice-water. "Can't we wait until some one comes?" he asked timidly.

"Who 's likely to come? You got any friends on the way? I have n't. There 's another thing: the stage will be along to-morrow. We 've got to get warnin' to it that the Kiowas are on the war-path. If we don't — well, you know what happened to the freight outfit."

"If one of us goes, how can he get away?"

"I've thought of that. It will be dark for an hour before the moon gets up. The one that goes will have to drop off the bank an' swim down with the current for a quarter of a mile or so, then get to the shore, crawl across the prairie till

he 's clear of the sentries, an' make a bee-line for Tascosa."

"I could n't find my way in the dark," faltered Arthur.

Jack nodded. "I doubt if you could. I'm elected, then."

"Why — why can't we both go?"

"We could n't take Dinsmore fifty yards. He 's too sick a man."

"He 's going to die anyhow. If I stay, we 'll both die — horribly. It 's every man for himself now."

Jack shook his head. "If you feel that way, you go an' I'll stay."

"I — I can't go alone." He pushed his plea one step farther. "He 's a criminal — a murderer. He'd kill you if he could, and he 's already betrayed me. There 's no call for us to wait for certain death on his account."

The Ranger spoke gently. "None for you, but he 's in my hands. I'll see it out. Mebbe you can get through the lines. Crawl through the grass. Keep yore nerve an' lie low if you hear 'em comin'. Once you 're through, you 'll be all right."

"I tell you I can't go alone. If it has to be that one goes and one stays, then I'll stay."

"That 's how it has to be. It 's about an even break, I reckon. They 're liable to get me if I go. They 're liable to get you if you stay. Then again, they 're liable to get neither of us if I can get through."

"What if they rush me?"

"Don't lose yore head. You can stand 'em off. They'll never make as strong an attack as they did this mo'nin'. If they make any real rush, it will likely be just before daybreak. Indians don't do business at night."

Jack made his preparations swiftly. He took off his boots and tied them to his belt. His hat he left behind.

"How will I know whether you get through the sentries?" asked Ridley.

"If you hear any shootin', you'll know I probably did n't. But I'm sure figurin' on gettin' through. Don't you forget for a minute that every hour brings help nearer. So long, old man. Best of luck!"

The Ranger grinned cheerfully at the other boy as he crept into the brush at the edge of the water. Presently Arthur heard a faint *plop* and knew that the Texan had begun his journey.

The swift current carried the swimmer downstream rapidly. He used his arms just enough to keep himself up, and let the power of the water do the rest. As a small boy he had lived on the Brazos. He knew the tricks of the expert, so that he was able now to swim with only his nose showing. For it was certain that the Indians had set watchers on the river to guard against an escape.

The island vanished behind him. Now and then he caught from one bank or the other the

glow of camp-fires. Once he was sure he heard the beating of a tom-tom.

And once he gave himself up for lost. The rapid current had swept him close to the right bank. Across his vision flashed a picture of a brave armed with bow and arrow standing above him on the shore. He dived instantly. When he came up for air, only a bit of his red topknot showed. The swimmer heard the twang of an arrow and dived a second time. He was in the deep shadows of overhanging brush when he shook the water out of his eyes next time. For a dozen seconds he drew his breath in fear. But there came no shout of warning to other watchers, no shot or outcry to shatter the stillness. He guessed that the Kiowa had taken him for a log drifting downstream and had aimed wantonly to test his accuracy.

Several hundred yards below the island Jack caught at a bush projecting into the water. He swung close to the bank and very cautiously drew himself out of the river.

He listened. Except for the sound of the rushing water the night was still. Very carefully he wormed his way forward into the prairie. His progress was slow, for he had to make sure of each foot of his advance. Under cover of a mesquite-bush he put on his water-soaked boots. He crept fifty yards — one hundred. To his right a camp-fire was burning. It seemed to him once or twice that he heard voices.

An old trail worn nearly a foot deep by buffaloes served his need. In this trench he was partly hidden and could make better progress. He traveled on all fours, still alert in every sense for danger.

Suddenly he sank full length into the trench. On the other side of a cactus-bush two Indians were squatting. They sat and talked.

The heart of the Ranger sank. At any moment they might discover his presence, or they might sit there the whole night and hold him prisoner in his ditch.

For an hour he lay there, wondering each moment whether the ticking of his watch might not betray him. Then, in a leisurely way, the sentries got up and sauntered toward the river. The moon was up now, and he could see their naked bodies shining in the light.

The two Kiowas stopped a moment on the bank and talked before they separated. One moved up the river; the other turned and came back directly toward Roberts. The Ranger lay in the buffalo-trail hoping that in the darkness he might escape observation. He was helpless. Even if he had brought a gun with him he dared not shoot, for if the alarm were given he would be driven out of cover in a few minutes.

The brave came forward to the very edge of the wallow. His moccasin touched the body of the prostrate man. Some slight shift of his atti-

tude precipitated the crisis. He turned to listen to some sound, and his foot pressed upon the leg of the Ranger.

There was an instant volcanic upheaval. The Indian, startled, leaped back. Jack was upon him like a wildcat. They struggled, their bodies so close that the Kiowa could not use his rifle. The Texan had a double advantage, that of surprise and of a more muscular body. Moreover, the redskin made the mistake of trying to cling to his gun. He was flung down to the ground hard, the white man on top of him.

Jack became aware that the Indian was going to shout, and knew that if he did all was lost. His strong, brown fingers closed on the throat of the brave. There was a wild thrashing of limbs in a struggle to escape. The grip tightened, cut off a gurgle of escaping air. The naked arms and legs jerked more feebly. . . .

When Roberts crept away into the darkness he carried with him the knife of the Kiowa. The rifle would only have hampered him, since he had to travel fast and light.

With every yard gained now he was nearer safety. He knew he was leaving the camp behind. Presently he rose to his feet and traveled faster. For the safety of the two on the island depended upon the speed with which he covered the distance between him and Tascosa.

The plainsman seldom walks. His high-heeled

boots would be torture on a long tramp. When he wants to reach a place, he rides on horseback. Jack had not walked five miles at a time within a dozen years. Now his long legs reached for the ground in a steady stride that ate up the leagues. He guided his course by the stars until he struck the river far above the camp. Once he stopped for a drink, but the thought of Ridley on the island drove his tired limbs on. Heel and toe, heel and toe, the steady march continued, till the Ranger, lithe and strong though the wind and sun and outdoor life had made him, was ready to drop with fatigue. His feet, pushed forward in the boots by the height of the heels, burned as with fire from the pain of outraged flesh rubbing against stiff leather.

But it was not in him to quit. He set his teeth in his exhaustion and ploughed on up the trail. At last he saw the far, faint lights of Tascosa. The last mile or two were interminable, but he walked into the Bird Cage just as the clock on the wall was striking three.

The music had started for a dance. A girl in a spangled dress ran up to him.

"Come on. Let's dance," she cried; then stopped and looked at him in surprise: "What's the matter with you?"

The Ranger climbed up on the bar and beat upon it with the heel of his boot. The dancers stopped in their tracks as the music died.

"The Kiowas are on the warpath. They've got two white men trapped on the big island below the bend. Gather all the horses, guns, and men you can. We start in twenty minutes."

Cowboys left their partners standing in the middle of the floor. The musicians dropped their bows and fiddles. Bar-tenders left unfilled the orders they had just taken. For Indians in their war-paint were a fact always very near to the frontiersman, and whatever faults the Southwest may have had in those days, its warm heart answered instantly the call for help.

The dancers scattered in all directions to get ready. A gong, beaten by the owner of the Bird Cage, rang out stridently into the quiet night to rally sleeping citizens. Children, wakened by the clamor, began to wail. Dogs barked. Excited men flung out questions and hurried away without waiting for answers.

But out of the confusion came swift action. Each man looked to his own ammunition, weapons, horse. Women hurriedly put up lunches and packed saddlebags with supplies. In an incredibly short time a company of fifty riders had gathered in front of the Bird Cage.

With the Ranger at their head, they went out of town at a fast trot. If there had been anybody there to notice it, he would have seen that the clock on the wall at the Bird Cage registered the time as twenty-seven minutes past three.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TEST

WHEN Ridley heard the faint *plop* of the Ranger's body as it dropped into the water, his heart died under the fifth rib. He was alone — alone with a wounded man in his care, and five hundred fiends ravenous for his blood. For a moment the temptation was strong in him to follow Roberts into the water. Why should he stay to let these devils torture him? Dinsmore had betrayed him, to the ruination of his life. He owed the fellow nothing but ill-will. And the man was a triple-notch murderer. It would be a good riddance to the country if he should be killed.

But the arguments of the young fellow did not convince him. He had showed the white feather once on impulse, without a chance to reason out the thing. But if he deserted this wounded man now he would be a yellow coyote — and he knew it. There was something in him stronger than fear that took him back to the helpless outlaw babbling disjointed ravings.

He bathed the man's fevered body with cold water from the river and changed the bandages on the wound. He listened, in an agony of apprehension, for the sound of a shot. None came, but this did not bring certainty that the Ranger had

escaped. He had left behind all his arms, and it was quite possible that they had captured him without first wounding him.

Arthur reasoned with himself about his terror. Of what use was it? Why fear, since he had to face the danger anyhow? But when he thought of the morning and what it would bring forth he was sick with the dread he could not crush.

The hours lagged endlessly. He had his watch out a thousand times trying to read its face. Occasionally he crept around the island to make sure the Kiowas were not trying to surprise him. Hope began to grow in him as the night grew old, and this alternated with terror; for he knew that with the coming of dawn, the redskins would begin an attack.

His mind followed the Ranger on his journey. By this time he must surely be halfway to Tascosa if he had escaped the Kiowas. . . . Now he might have reached the cottonwood clump beyond Big Ford. . . . Perhaps he might jump up a camp outfit with horses. If so, that would cut down the time needed to reach town.

Five o'clock by Ridley's watch! He made another circuit of his little island, and at the head of it stopped to peer into the lessening darkness. A log, traveling down the river from some point near its headwaters in New Mexico, was drifting toward the island. His attention was arrested by the way it traveled. A log in a stream follows the

line of least resistance. It floats in such a way as to offer the smallest surface to the force of the current. But this log was going down at a right angle to the bank instead of parallel to it. Was it being propelled by the current alone, or by some living power behind it?

Ridley posted himself behind a cottonwood, his repeater ready for action. In another moment he would know, because if the log was adrift in the river, it would miss the point of the island and keep on its way.

Straight to the point of land the log came. There it stuck against the nose of the island. A head followed by a naked body drew itself from behind the log and climbed across it to the bank above. A second head and body appeared, a third and a fourth.

Ridley's fear was gone. He had a job to do, and he went at it in a workmanlike manner. His first shot dropped the brave on the bank. His second missed, his third went hissing up the river. But the fourth caught full in the throat one of the Kiowas on the log. The painted warrior shot headfirst into the water and dropped as though he had been a stone. Before Arthur could fire again, the passengers astride the dead tree dived into the stream. Slowly the log swung around and was sucked into the current. Here and there a feathered head bobbed up. The boy fired at them from a sense of duty, but he did not flatter himself that he had scored another hit.

But the immediate danger of being rushed was past. Ridley circled the island again to make sure that the attack at the head had not been a feint to cover one in the rear.

During the night Arthur had not been idle. Behind a large rock he had scooped out a small cave in which he and the wounded man might lie protected. Now the Indians, in the full light of day, were spraying the spot with bullets. Fortunately they were notoriously poor shots, and their guns were the worst ever made. For hours the fusillade continued. Occasionally the defender answered with a shot or two to discourage any further attempt at storming his position.

The most welcome sound in Ridley's life was a scattering volley of shots that came from back of the Kiowa camp. There was a sudden rush for horses by the braves and the scurry of pounding hoofs as they fled across the prairie. A moment later came the whoop of the cowboys in the rescue party.

Arthur, in an ecstasy of relief, ran to the edge of the water and waved his hat. Across the river came in answer the "Yip-yip, yippy-yip-yip" of the line-riders in the company. Several of them plunged into the stream and swam their horses across to the island. Among these were Jumbo Wilkins and Tex Roberts.

"I see you done held the fort, son," said the fat man. "Fine and dandy! How 's Dinsmore?"

"Quieter. He slept a good deal in the night. How are we going to get him across the river?"

The Ranger joined them. He nodded a friendly greeting at Ridley.

"Our luck held up all right. I see you been doin' some fancy shootin'."

Arthur looked at him. The eyes of the Easterner were full of timid doubt. What did this game Texan think of him who had proposed to leave a wounded man to his fate? The Ranger beamed a kindly comradeship, but the other young fellow wondered what was passing in the back of his mind.

They held a committee on ways and means about Dinsmore.

"We can't stay here — got to get him to town where he can be fixed up," Jumbo said.

"We'll take him over to the other bank and send for a buckboard," decided Jack.

The wounded man was carried to the head of the island, and strapped to the back of a horse. Jumbo, Roberts, and Ridley guided the horse into the current and helped it fight through to the shallow water beyond.

Twenty-four hours later Dinsmore was in bed in Tascosa. Dr. Bridgman said, with the usual qualification about complications, that the man probably would get well. The bullet had not punctured his lungs.

CHAPTER XXIII

A SHY YOUNG MAN DINES

RAMONA met Arthur Ridley face to face just outside of the post-office.

"You dandy boy!" she cried, and held out both hands to him. Her eyes were shining. The gifts of friendship and admiration were in them.

He could not find a word to say. A lump rose in his throat and choked him.

"It was just fine of you — fine!" she told him. "I was so glad to hear that a friend of mine did it. You *are* still my friend, are n't you?"

"If you 'll let me be," he said humbly. "But — I have n't done anything to deserve it."

"Everybody 's praising you because you stayed with that Dinsmore man and saved his life at the risk of your own — after he had treated you so mean too. I'm so proud of you."

"You need n't be," he answered bluntly. "I wanted to slip away and leave him. I — I proposed it to Jack Roberts. But he would n't have it. He laid the law down. One of us had to go, one stay. I had n't the nerve to go, so I stayed."

"I don't believe it — not for a minute," came her quick, indignant response. "And if you did — what of it? It is n't what we want to do that counts. It 's what we really do!"

He shook his head wistfully. He would have liked to believe her, but he felt there was no credit due him.

"I fought because I had to if I was going to save my own skin. I have n't told any one else this, but I can't have you thinking me game when I know I 'm not."

"Was it to save yourself you flung yourself down in front of father and let that awful man Dinsmore shoot at you?" she demanded, eyes flashing.

"A fellow can't stand by and see some one murdered without lifting a hand. I did n't have time to get frightened that time."

"Well, all I've got to say is that you're the biggest goose I ever saw, Art Ridley. Here you've done two fine things and you go around trying to show what a big coward you are."

He smiled gravely. "I'm not advertising it. I told you because —"

" — Because you're afraid I'll think too well of you."

"Because I want you to know me as I am."

"Then if I'm to know you as you are I'll have to get a chance to see what you really are. Dad and Auntie and I will expect you to supper tomorrow night."

"Thank you. I'll be there."

Casually she enlarged her invitation. "I don't suppose you'll see that very shy young man, Mr. Roberts."

"I might."

"Then, will you ask him to come too? I'm going to find out whether you acted as scared as you say you did."

"Jack knows how scared I was, but he won't tell. Sure I'll get word to him."

He did. At precisely six o'clock the two young men appeared at the home of Clint Wadley's sister. The Ranger was a very self-conscious guest. It was the first time he had dined with ladies at their home since he had lost his own mother ten years earlier. He did not know what to do with his hands and feet. The same would have been true of his hat if Ramona had not solved that problem by taking it from him. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He felt a good deal warmer than the actual temperature of the room demanded.

But Ramona noticed from the background that as soon as she and her aunt retired from the scene his embarrassment vanished. This slim, brown young man was quite at his ease with Clint Wadley, much more so than young Ridley. He was essentially a man's man, and his young hostess liked him none the less for that.

She made a chance to talk with him alone after supper. They were standing in the parlor near the window. Ramona pressed the end of her little finger against a hole in the pane.

"I wonder if you'd like me to sing 'Swanee River' for you, Mr. Roberts?" she asked.

He did not mind being teased. By this time he had regained his confidence. He had discovered that she would not bite even though she might laugh at him in a friendly way.

"You sing it fine," he said.

"I was n't singing it for you the other time, but for Mr. — what 's-his-name, Gurley?"

"I could n't very well have you keep shoutin' out, 'I 'm a girl,' so I figured — "

"I know what you figured, sir. You wanted to take all the chances that were taken. Father says it was the quickest-witted thing he ever knew." She shot another dart at him, to his confusion. "Do you like my voice?"

"Well, ma'am, I —"

"You don't have to tell any stories. I see you don't."

Jack took heart. "If you're fishin' for a compliment —"

"What a tactful thing to tell a girl," she said, smiling.

"— I'll tell you that I never heard you sing better."

"Or worse, for that matter," she added; and with one of her swift changes of mood switched the topic of conversation. "How do you like Art Ridley?"

"He'll do to take along."

"That 's not the way he talks. He says he — he wanted to run away from the island and leave that man Dinsmore, but you would n't let him." Her eyes met his very directly.

"He 's a great lad for imaginin' things. I never want to see any one hold up his end better."

"You mean that he *did n't* say he wanted to leave Dinsmore?"

With her gaze searching him so steadily, it had to be an out-and-out lie to serve. Jack lied competently. "Not a word."

Her little finger tapped the hole in the pane gently while she reflected. "He told me —"

"That boy 's still worryin' about losin' that money for Mr. Wadley, don't you reckon? He 's got it tucked in his mind that a game man never would have been robbed. So he 's decided he must be yellow. Nothin' to it a-tall. No quitter ever would have stood off those Kiowas like he did."

"That 's what I think." She turned to the Ranger again, nodding agreement. "You've relieved my mind. I should n't like to think that —"

She let her sentence trail out to nothing. Jack Roberts guessed its conclusion. She would n't like to think that the man she loved was not game.

CHAPTER XXIV

TEX BORROWS A BLACKSNAKE

DINSMORE recovered from his wound and was held prisoner by Captain Ellison for a month after he was well. Then the ranger captain dismissed the man with a warning.

"Skedaddle, you damn jayhawker," was his cavalier farewell. "But listen. If ever I get the deadwood on you an' yore outfit, I'll sure put you through. You know me, Dinsmore. I went through the war. For two years I took the hides off'n 'em.[1] I'm one of the lads that knocked the bark off this country. An' I've got the best bunch of man-hunters you ever did see. I'm not braggin'. I'm tellin' you that my boys will make you look like a plugged nickel if you don't get shet of yore meanness. They're a hell-poppin' bunch of jim-dandies, an' don't you ever forget it."

Homer Dinsmore spat tobacco-juice on the floor by way of expressing his contempt. "Hell!" he sneered. "We were doin' business in this neck of the woods before ever you come, an' we'll be here after you've gone."

The Ranger Captain gave a little shrug to his shoulders. "Some folks ain't got any more sense

[1] To "take the hides off'n 'em" was the expressive phraseology in which the buffalo-hunter described his business.

than that hog rootin' under the pecan tree, Dinsmore. I've seen this country when you could swap a buffalo-bull hide for a box of cartridges or a plug o' tobacco. You cayn't do it now, can you? I had thirty wagons full of bales of hides at old Fort Griffin two years ago. Now I could n't fill one with the best of luck. In five years the buffaloes will be gone absolutely — mebbe in less time. The Indians are goin' with the buffaloes — an' the bad-men are a-goin' to travel the same trail. Inside of three years they 'll sure be hard to find outside of jails. But you got to go yore own way. You're hard to curry, an' you wear 'em low. Suits me if it does you. We 'll plant you with yore boots on, one of these days."

Dinsmore swaggered from the jail and presently rode out of town to join his companions. Three days later an acquaintance stopped Jack Roberts on the street.

"Seen Cap Ellison this mo'nin'? He was down at the shippin'-pen an' wanted to see you. The old man's hot as a ginger-mill about somethin'."

The Ranger strolled down toward the cattle-yards. On the way he met Arthur Ridley. They had come to be pretty good friends in the past month. The standards of the Texan were undergoing revision. He had been brought up in an outdoor school which taught that the rock-bottom factor of a man's character is gameness.

Without it nothing else counted. This was as vital for a man as virtue for a woman. But it had begun to reach him that pluck is largely a matter of training. Arthur had lived soft, and his nerve, like his muscles, needed toughening. Were his gayety, his loyalty, his fundamental decency, the affectionate sweetness of his disposition, to count for nothing? He had a dozen advantages that Jack had not, and the cowboy admired him even though he was not hard as a rock.

"Have you spoken to Captain Ellison yet?" asked Ridley eagerly.

"Says he 's thinkin' about it, Art. There 's goin' to be a vacancy on the force soon. My notion is that you 'll get the appointment."

It was a part of Ridley's charm for the Texan that he would not give up to his timidity. The young fellow meant to fight it out to a finish. That was one of the reasons why he wanted to join the Rangers, to be put in places that would force him to go through to a fighting finish. He had one other reason. Arthur wanted to settle a score with the Dinsmores.

Captain Ellison was listening to the complaint of a drover.

"I aim to drive a clean herd, Cap, but you know how it is yore own self. I start to drive in the spring when the hair 's long an' the brand 's hard to read. By the time I get here, the old hair is fallin' out an' the brand is plain. But what 's a

fellow to do? I cayn't drop those off-brands by the way, can I? The inspector —"

"That 's all right, Steel. The inspector knows you're on the level. Hello, Jack! I been lookin' for you."

The Captain drew his man to one side. "Steve Gurley 's in town. He came as a spokesman for the Dinsmores an' went to see Clint Wadley. The damn scoundrel served notice on Clint that the gang had written evidence which tied Ford up with their deviltry. He said if Clint did n't call me off so 's I 'd let 'em alone, they would disgrace his son's memory. Of course Wadley is all broke up about it. But he 's no quitter. He knows I 'm goin' through, an' he would n't expect me not to do the work I 'm paid for."

"Do you want me to arrest Gurley?"

"Would n't do any good. No; just keep tabs on the coyote till he leaves town. He ought to be black-snaked, but that 's not our business, I reckon."

Ridley walked back with the Ranger toward the main street of the town. From round a corner there came to them a strident voice.

"You stay right here, missy, till I 'm through. I 'm tellin' you about yore high-heeled brother. See? He was a rustler. That 's what he was — a low-down thief and brand-blotter."

"Let me pass. I won't listen to you." The clear young voice was expressive of both indignation and fear.

"Not a step till I'm through tellin' you. Me, I'm Steve Gurley, the curly-haired terror of the Panhandle. When I talk, you listen. Un'erstand?"

The speech of the man was thick with drink. He had spent the night at the Bird Cage and was now on his way to the corral for his horse.

"You take Miss Ramona home. I'll tend to Gurley," said Roberts curtly to his friend. Into his eyes had come a cold rage Arthur had never before seen there.

At sight of them the bully's brutal insolence vanished. He tried to pass on his way, but the Ranger stopped him.

"Just a moment, Gurley. You're goin' with me," said Jack, ominously quiet.

White and shaken, 'Mona bit her lip to keep from weeping. She flashed one look of gratitude at her father's former line-rider, and with a little sob of relief took Ridley's offered arm.

"You got a warrant for me?" bluffed the outlaw.

At short range there is no weapon more deadly than the human eye. Jack Roberts looked at the bully and said: "Give me yore gun."

Steve Gurley shot his slant look at the Ranger, considered possibilities — and did as he was told.

"Now right about face and back-track uptown," ordered the officer.

At McGuffey's store Jack stopped his prisoner. A dozen punchers and cattlemen were hanging

about. Among them was Jumbo Wilkins. He had a blacksnake whip in his hand and was teasing a pup with it. The Ranger handed over to Jumbo his guns and borrowed the whip.

Gurley backed off in a sudden alarm. "Don't you touch me! Don't you dass touch me! I'll cut yore heart out if you do."

The lash whistled through the air and wound itself cruelly round the legs of the bully. The man gave a yell of rage and pain. He lunged forward to close with Roberts, and met a driving left that caught him between the eyes and flung him back. Before he could recover the Ranger had him by the collar at arm's length and the torture of the whip was maddening him. He cursed, struggled, raved, threatened, begged for mercy. He tried to fling himself to the ground. He wept tears of agony. But there was no escape from the deadly blacksnake that was cutting his flesh to ribbons.

Roberts, sick at the thing he had been doing, flung the shrieking man aside and leaned up against the wall of the store.

Jumbo came across to him and offered his friend a drink.

"You'll feel better if you take a swallow of old forty-rod," he promised.

The younger man shook his head. "Much obliged, old-timer. I'm all right now. It was a kind of sickenin' job, but I had to do it or kill him."

"What was it all about?" asked Jumbo eagerly. The fat line-rider was a good deal of a gossip and loved to know the inside of every story.

Jack cast about for a reason. "He — he said I had red hair."

"Well, you old son of a mule-skinner, what 's the matter with that? You have, ain't you?" demanded the amazed Wilkins.

"Mebbe I have, but he can't tell me so."

That was all the satisfaction the public ever got. It did a good deal of guessing, however, and none of it came near the truth.

CHAPTER XXV

"THEY'RE RUNNIN' ME OUTA TOWN"

JUMBO WILKINS came wheezing into the Sunset Trail corral, where Jack Roberts was mending a broken bridle. " 'Lo, Tex. Looks like you're gittin' popular, son. Folks a-comin' in fifty miles for to have a little talk with you."

The eyes of the Ranger grew intelligent. He knew Jumbo's habit of mind. The big line-rider always made the most of any news he might have.

"Friends of mine?" asked Jack casually.

"Well, mebbe friends ain't just the word. Say acquaintances. You know 'em well enough to shoot at and to blacksnake 'em, but not well enough to drink with."

"Did they *say* they wanted to see me?"

"A nod is as good as a wink to a blind bronc. They said they'd come to make you hard to find."

The Ranger hammered down a rivet carefully. "Many of 'em?"

"Two this trip. One of 'em used to think yore topknot was red. I dunno what he thinks now."

"And the other?"

"Carries the brand of Overstreet."

"Where are these anxious citizens, Jumbo?"

"Last I saw of 'em they were at the Bird Cage

lappin' up another of the same. They've got business with Clint Wadley, too, they said."

Jack guessed that business was blackmail. It occurred to him that since these visitors had come to town to see him, he had better gratify their desire promptly. Perhaps after they had talked with him they might not have time to do their business with Wadley.

As Jumbo waddled uptown beside him, Roberts arranged the details of his little plan. They separated at the corner of the street a block from the Bird Cage. Wilkins had offered to lend a hand, but his friend defined the limit of the help he might give.

"You come in, shake hands with me, an' ask that question. Then you're through. Understand, Jumbo?"

"Sure. But I want to tell you again Overstreet is no false-alarm bad-man. He'll fight at the drop of the hat. That's his reputation, anyhow — wears 'em low an' comes a-shootin'."

"I'll watch out for him. An' I'll look for you in about three minutes."

"Me, I'll be there, son, and I wish you the best of luck."

Gurley was at the bar facing the door when the Ranger walked into the Bird Cage. He had been just ready to gulp down another drink, but as his eyes fell on this youth who came forward with an elastic step the heart died within him. It

had been easy while the liquor was in his brain to brag of what he meant to do. It was quite another thing to face in battle this brown, competent youth who could hit silver dollars in the air with a revolver.

His companion read in Gurley's sallow face the dismay that had attacked him. Overstreet turned and faced the newcomer. The outlaw was a short, heavy-set man with remarkably long arms. He had come from Trinidad, Colorado, and brought with him the reputation of a killer. His eyes looked hard at the red-haired youngster, but he made no comment.

Jack spoke to the bartender. He looked at neither of the bad-men, but he was very coolly and alertly on guard.

"Joe, I left my blacksnake at home," he said. "Have you got one handy?"

"Some guys are lucky, Steve," jeered Overstreet, taking his cue from the Ranger. "Because you fell over a box and this fellow beat you up while you was down, he thinks he 's a regular go-getter. He looks to me like a counterfeit four-bit piece, if anybody asks you."

Jumbo Wilkins puffed into the place and accepted the Ranger's invitation to take a drink.

"What makes you so gaunted, Jack? You look right peaked," he commented as they waited for their drinks.

"Scared stiff, Jumbo. I hear two wild an'

woolly bad-men are after me. One is a tall, lop-sided, cock-eyed rooster, an' the other is a hammered-down sawed-off runt. They sure have got me good an' scared. I've been runnin' ever since I heard they were in town."

Gurley gulped down his drink and turned toward the door hastily. "Come, let's go, Overstreet. I got to see a man."

The Texan and the Coloradoan looked at each other with steel-cold eyes. They measured each other in deadly silence, and while one might have counted twenty the shadow of death hovered over the room. Then Overstreet made his choice. The bragging had all been done by Gurley. He could save his face without putting up a fight.

"Funny how some folks are all blown up by a little luck," he sneered, and he followed his friend to the street.

"You got 'em buffaloed sure, Jack. Tell me how you do it," demanded Jumbo with a fat grin.

"I'm the law, Jumbo."

"Go tell that to the Mexicans, son. What do you reckon a killer like Overstreet cares for the law? He figured you might down him before he could gun you — did n't want to risk an even break with you."

The Ranger poured his untasted liquor into the spittoon and settled the bill. "Think I'll drop around to the Silver Dollar an' see if my birds have lit again."

At the Silver Dollar Jack found his friend the ex-Confederate doing business with another cattleman.

"I'd call that a sorry-lookin' lot, Winters," he was saying. "I know a jack-pot bunch of cows when I see 'em. They look to me like they been fed on short grass an' shin-oak." His face lighted at sight of the Ranger. "Hello, brindle-haid! Did n't know you was in town."

The quick eye of the officer had swept over the place and found the two men he wanted sitting inconspicuously at a small table.

"I'm not here for long, Sam. Two genuwine blown-in-the-bottle bad-men are after my scalp. They're runnin' me outa town. Seen anything of 'em? They belong to the Dinsmore outfit."

The old soldier looked at him with a sudden startled expression. He knew well what men were sitting against the wall a few steps from him. This was talk that might have to be backed by a six-shooter. Bullets were likely to be flying soon.

"You don't look to me like you're hittin' yore heels very fast to make a get-away, Jack," he said dryly.

"I'm sure on the jump. They're no bully-puss kind of men, but sure enough terrors from the chaparral. If I never get out o' town, ship my saddle in a gunny-sack to my brother at Dallas."

"Makin' yore will, are you?" inquired Joe Johnston's former trooper.

The red-haired man grinned. "I got to make arrangements. They came here to get me. Two of 'em — bad-men with blood in their eyes." He hummed, with jaunty insolence:

"He's a killer and a hater!
He's the great annihilator!
He's a terror of the boundless prai-ree.

"That goes double. I'm certainly one anxious citizen. Don't you let 'em hurt me, Sam."

There was a movement at the table where the two men were sitting. One of them had slid from his chair and was moving toward the back door.

The Ranger pretended to catch sight of him for the first time. "Hello, Gurley! What's yore hurry? Got to see another man, have you?"

The rustler did not wait to answer. He vanished through the door and fled down the alley in the direction of the corral. Overstreet could do as he pleased, but he intended to slap a saddle on his horse and make tracks for the cap-rock country.

Overstreet himself was not precisely comfortable in his mind, but he did not intend to let a smooth-faced boy run him out of the gambling-house before a dozen witnesses. If he had to fight, he would fight. But in his heart he cursed Gurley for a yellow-backed braggart. The fellow had got him into this and then turned tail. The man from Colorado wished devoutly that Pete Dinsmore were beside him.

"You're talkin' at me, young fellow. Listen: I ain't lookin' for any trouble with you — none a-tall. But I'm not Steve Gurley. Where I come from, folks grow man-size. Don't lean on me too hard. I'm liable to decrease the census of red-haired guys."

Overstreet rose and glared at him, but at the same time one hand was reaching for his hat.

"You leavin' town too, Mr. Overstreet?" inquired the Ranger.

"What 's it to you? I'll go when I'm ready."

"'We shall meet, but we shall miss you — there will be one vacant chair,'" murmured the young officer, misquoting a song of the day. "Seems like there 's nothin' to this life but meetin' an' partin'. Here you are one minute, an' in a quarter of an hour you 're hittin' the high spots tryin' to catch up with friend Steve."

"Who said so? I'll go when I'm good an' ready," reiterated the bad-man.

"Well, yore bronc needs a gallop to take the kinks out of his legs. Give my regards to the Dinsmores an' tell 'em that Tascosa is no sort of place for shorthorns or tinhorns."

"Better come an' give them regards yore own self."

"Mebbe I will, one of these glad mo'nin's. So long, Mr. Overstreet. Much obliged to you an' Steve for not massacreein' me."

The ironic thanks of the Ranger were lost, for

the killer from Colorado was already swaggering out of the front door.

The old Confederate gave a whoop of delight. "I never did see yore match, you doggoned old scalawag. You'd better go up into Mexico and make Billy the Kid [1] eat out of yore hand. This tame country is no place for you, Jack."

Roberts made his usual patient explanation. "It's the law. They can't buck the whole Lone Star State. If he shot me, a whole passel of Rangers would be on his back pretty soon. So he hits the trail instead." He turned to Ridley, who had just come into the Silver Dollar. "Art, will you keep cases on Overstreet an' see whether he leaves town right away?"

A quarter of an hour later Ridley was back with information.

"Overstreet's left town — lit out after Gurley."

The old Rebel grinned. "He won't catch him this side of the cap-rock."

[1] Billy The Kid was the most notorious outlaw of the day. He is said to have killed twenty-one men before Sheriff Pat Garrett killed him at the age of twenty-one years.

CHAPTER XXVI

FOR PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Mr. Peter Dinsmore was of both an impulsive and obstinate disposition. He wanted what he wanted when he wanted it. Somewhere he had heard that if a man desired his business well done, he must do it himself. Gurley had proved a poor messenger. Peter would call upon Clint Wadley in person and arrange an armistice.

He had another and a more urgent reason for getting to town promptly. A jumping toothache had kept him awake all night. After he reached Tascosa, Dinsmore was annoyed to find that Dr. Bridgman had ridden down the river to look after the fractured leg of a mule-skinner.

"Is n't there any one else in this condemned burg can pull teeth?" he demanded irritably of the bartender at the Bird Cage.

"There certainly is. Buttermilk Brown is a sure-enough dentist. He had to take to bull-whackin' for to make a livin', but I reckon he 's not forgot how. You 'll probably find him sleepin' off a hang-over at the Four-Bit Corral."

This prophecy proved true, but Dinsmore was not one to let trifles turn him aside. He led the reluctant ex-dentist to a water-trough and soused his head under the pump.

"Is that a-plenty?" he asked presently, desisting from his exercise with the pump-handle.

Buttermilk sputtered a half-drowned assent. His nerves were still jumpy, and his head was not clear, but he had had enough cold water. Heroic treatment of this sort was not necessary to fit him for pulling a tooth.

They adjourned to the room where Buttermilk had stored his professional tools. Dinsmore indicated the back tooth that had to come out. The dentist peered at it, inserted his forceps and set to work. The tooth came out hard, but at last he exhibited its long prongs to the tortured victim.

"We get results," said Buttermilk proudly.

"How much?" asked Pete.

It happened that the dentist did not know his patient. He put a price of five dollars on the job. Dinsmore paid it and walked with Buttermilk to the nearest saloon for a drink.

Pete needed a little bracer. The jumping pain still pounded like a piledriver at his jaw. While the bartender was handing him a glass and a bottle, Dinsmore caressed tenderly the aching emptiness and made a horrible discovery. Buttermilk Brown had pulled the wrong tooth.

Considering his temperament, Pete showed remarkable self-restraint. He did not slay Buttermilk violently and instantly. Instead he led him back to the room of torture.

"You pulled the wrong tooth, you drunken wreck," he said in effect, but in much more emphatic words. "Now yank out the right one, and if you make another mistake —"

He did not finish the threat, but it is possible that Buttermilk understood. The dentist removed with difficulty the diseased molar.

"Well, we're through now," he said cheerfully. "I don't know as I ought to charge you for that last one. I'll leave that to you to say."

"We're not quite through," corrected the patient. "I'm goin' to teach you to play monkey-shines with Pete Dinsmore's teeth." He laid a large revolver on the table and picked up the forceps. "Take that chair, you bowlegged, knock-kneed, run-down runt."

Buttermilk protested in vain. He begged the bad-man for mercy with tears in his eyes.

"I'm goin' to do Scripture to you, and then some," explained Dinsmore. "It says in the Bible a tooth for a tooth, but I aim to pay good measure."

The amateur dentist pulled four teeth and played no favorites. A molar, a bicuspid, a canine, and an incisor were laid in succession on the table.

Buttermilk Brown wept with rage and pain.

"Four times five is twenty. Dig up twenty dollars for professional services," said Pete.

His tearful patient paid the fee. This was the

most painful, violent, and high-handed episode of Buttermilk's young life. Never in Shelbyville, Indiana, from which town he had migrated hopefully westward with his diploma, had such outrages been heard of.

The instruments of Providence are sometimes strange ones. Nobody would have picked Pete Dinsmore for a reformer, but he changed the course of one young dentist's life. Buttermilk fled from the Southwest in horror, took the pledge eagerly, returned to Shelbyville and married the belle of the town. He became a specialist in bridge-work, of which he carried a golden example in his own mouth. His wife has always understood that Dr. Brown — nobody ever called him Buttermilk in his portly, prosperous Indiana days — lost his teeth trying to save a child from a runaway. Be that as it may, there is no record that he ever again pulled the wrong tooth for a patient.

Having completed his deed of justice, Dinsmore in high good humor with himself set out to call on Clint Wadley. He had made an inoffensive human being suffer, and that is always something to a man's credit. If he could not do any better, Pete would bully a horse, but he naturally preferred humans. They were more sensitive to pain.

CHAPTER XXVII

CLINT FREES HIS MIND

WADLEY was sitting on the porch with Ramona. He was still a semi-invalid, and when he exercised too much his daughter scolded him like the little mother she was.

"Keep me here much longer, an' I'll turn into a regular old gossip in breeches," he complained. "I'll be Jumbo Wilkins Number Two, like as not."

"Is Jumbo a specialist in gossip?" asked Ramona. She liked to get her father at reminiscences. It helped to pass time that hung heavy on his hands.

"Is he? Girl, he could talk a hind leg off'n a buckskin mule, Jumbo could." He stopped to chuckle. "Oncet, when we were drivin' a bunch of yearlin's on the Brazos, one of the boys picked up an old skull. Prob'ly some poor fellow killed by the Indians. Anyhow, that night when Jumbo was wound up good, one of the lads pretended to discover that skull an' brought it into the camp-fire light. Some one had wrote on it: 'Talked to death by Jumbo Wilkins.'"

'Mona rather missed the point. She was watching a man slouching down the road toward them. He was heavy-set and unwieldy, and he wore a wrinkled suit of butternut jeans.

The eyes of the cattleman chilled. "You go into the house, 'Mona. That fellow's Pete Dinsmore. I don't want you to meet him."

"Don't you, Dad?" The heart of the girl fluttered at sight of this man who had nearly killed her father, but it was not fear but anger that burned in her eyes. "I'm going to sit right here. What does he want? He's not coming — to make trouble, is he?"

"No. We've got business to settle. You run along in."

"I know what your business is. It's — about Ford."

He looked at her in surprised dismay. "Who told you that, honey?"

"I'll tell you about that after he's gone. I want to stay, Dad, to show him that I know all about it, and that we're not going to let him carry out any blackmailing scheme against us."

Dinsmore nodded grouchily as he came up the walk to the house. Wadley did not ask him to sit down, and since there were no unoccupied chairs the rustler remained standing.

"I got to have a talk with you, Clint," the outlaw said. "Send yore girl into the house."

"She'll listen to anything you have to say, Dinsmore. Get through with it soon as you can, an' hit the trail," said the cattleman curtly.

The other man flushed darkly. "You talk

mighty biggity these days. I remember when you was n't nothin' but a busted line-rider."

"Mebbeso. And before that I was a soldier in the army while you was doin' guerrilla jayhawkin'."

"Go ahead. Say anything you've a mind to, Clint. I'll make you pay before I'm through with you," answered the bad-man venomously.

"You will if you can; I know that. You're a bad lot, Dinsmore, you an' yore whole outfit. I'm glad Ellison an' his Rangers are goin' to clear you out of the country. A sure-enough good riddance, if any one asks me."

The cattleman looked hard at him. He too had been a fighting man, but it was not his reputation for gameness that restrained the ruffian. Wadley was a notch too high for him. He could kill another bad-man or some drunken loafer and get away with it. But he had seen the sentiment of the country when his brother had wounded the cattleman. It would not do to go too far. Times were changing in the Panhandle. Henceforth lawlessness would have to travel by night and work under cover. With the coming of the Rangers, men who favored law were more outspoken. Dinsmore noticed that they deferred less to him, partly, no doubt, because of what that fool boy Roberts had done without having yet had to pay for it.

"That 's what I've come to see you about,

Wadley. I'm not lookin' for trouble, but I never ran away from it in my life. No livin' man can lay on me without hell poppin'. You know it."

"Is that what you came to tell me, Dinsmore?" asked the owner of the A T O, his mouth set grim and hard.

There was an ugly look on the face of the outlaw, a cold glitter of anger in his deep-set eyes. "I hear you set the world an' all by that girl of yours there. Better send her in, Wadley. I'm loaded with straight talk."

The girl leaned forward in the chair. She looked at him with a flash of disdainful eyes in which was a touch of feminine ferocity. But she let her father answer the man.

"Go on," said the old Texan. "Onload what you've got to say, an' then pull yore freight."

"Suits me, Clint. I'm here to make a bargain with you. Call Ellison off. Make him let me an' my friends alone. If you don't, we're goin' to talk — about yore boy Ford." The man's upper lip lifted in a grin. He looked first at the father, then at the daughter.

There was a tightening of the soft, round throat, but she met his look without wincing. The pallor of her face lent accent to the contemptuous loathing of the slender girl.

"What are you goin' to say — that you murdered him, shot him down from behind?" demanded Wadley.

"That 's a lie, Clint. You know who killed him — an' why he did it. Ford could n't let the girls alone. I warned him as a friend, but he was hell-bent on havin' his own way."

The voice of the cattleman trembled. "Some day — I 'm goin' to hunt you down like a wolf for what you did to my boy."

A lump jumped to Ramona's throat. She slipped her little hand into the big one of her father, and with it went all her sympathy and all her love.

"You 're 'way off, Wadley. The boy was our friend. Why should we shoot him?" asked the man from the chaparral.

"Because he interfered with you when you robbed my messenger."

The startled eyes of the outlaw jumped to meet those of the cattleman. For a fraction of a second he was caught off his guard. Then the film of wary craftiness covered them again.

"That 's plumb foolishness, Clint. The Mexican — what 's his name? — killed Ford because he was jealous, an' if it had n't been for you, he 'd 'a' paid for it long ago. But that ain't what I came to talk about. I 'm here to tell you that I 've got evidence to prove that Ford was a rustler an' a hold-up. If it comes to a show-down, we 're goin' to tell what we know. Mebbe you want folks to know what kind of a brother yore girl had. That 's up to you."

Wadley exploded in a sudden fury of passion. "I'll make no bargain with the murderer of my boy. Get out of here, you damned yellow wolf. I don't want any truck with you at all till I get a chance to stomp you down like I would a rattler."

The bad-man bared his fangs. For one moment of horror Ramona thought he was going to strike like the reptile to which her father had compared him. He glared at the cattleman, the impulse strong in him to kill and be done with it. But the other side of him — the caution that had made it possible for him to survive so long in a world of violent men — held his hand until the blood-lust passed from his brain.

"You've said a-plenty," he snarled thickly. "Me, I've made my last offer to you. It's war between me 'n' you from now on."

He turned away and went slouching down the path to the road.

The two on the porch watched him out of sight. The girl had slipped inside her father's arm and was sobbing softly on his shoulder.

"There, honeybug, now don't you — don't you," Clint comforted. "He cayn't do us any harm. Ellison's hot on his trail. I'll give him six months, an' then he's through. Don't you fret, sweetheart. Daddy will look out for you all right."

"I — I was n't thinking about me," she whispered.

Both of them were thinking of the dead boy

and the threat to blacken his memory, but neither of them confessed it to the other. Wadley cast about for something to divert her mind and found it in an unanswered question of his own.

"You was goin' to tell me how come you to know what he wanted to talk with me about," the father reminded her.

"You remember that day when Arthur Ridley brought me home?"

He nodded assent.

"One of the Dinsmore gang — the one they call Steve Gurley — met me on the street. He was drunk, an' he stopped me to tell me about — Ford. I tried to pass, an' he would n't let me. He frightened me. Then Arthur an' Mr. Roberts came round the corner. Arthur came home with me, an' — you know what happened in front of McGuffey's store."

The face of the girl had flushed a sudden scarlet. Her father stared at her in an amazement that gave way to understanding. Through his veins there crashed a wave of emotion. If he had held any secret grudge against Tex Roberts, it vanished forever that moment. This was the kind of son he would have liked to have himself.

"By ginger, that was what he beat Gurley up for! Nobody knows why, an' Roberts kept the real reason under his hat. He 's a prince, Jack Roberts is. I did that boy a wrong, 'Mona, an' guessed it all the time, just because he had a

mix-up with Ford. He was n't to blame for that, anyhow, I've been told."

Ramona felt herself unaccountably trembling. There was a queer little lump in her throat, but she knew it was born of gladness.

"He 's been good to me," she said, and told of the experience with the traveling salesman on the stage.

Clint Wadley laughed. "I never saw that boy's beat. He 's got everything a fellow needs to win. I can tell you one thing; he's goin' to get a chance to run the A T O for me before he 's forty-eight hours older. He'll be a good buy, no matter what salary he sticks me for."

'Mona became aware that she was going to break down — and "make a little fool of herself," as she would have put it.

"I forgot to water my canary," she announced abruptly.

The girl jumped up, ran into the house and to her room. But if the canary was suffering from thirst, it remained neglected. Ramona's telltale face was buried in a pillow. She was not quite ready yet to look into her own eyes and read the message they told.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ON A COLD TRAIL

"Dog it, Jack, we got to go after the Dinsmores," said Ellison, pounding the table with his fist. "I've just had a letter from the old man wantin' to know why we don't get results. It 's not the Ranger policy to wait for outlaws to come to us. We go after 'em."

Tex smiled cheerfully. "Suits me fine. What are your instructions, Captain? Want me to arrest Homer Dinsmore again?"

"What would I do with him if you got him?" snapped the old-timer.

"You could turn him loose again," suggested Roberts, not entirely without sarcasm.

"If you boys were worth the powder to blow you-all up —!" exploded the veteran.

"Instead of bein' a jackpot bunch of triflin' no-account scalawags," murmured Jack.

"— You'd hustle out an' get evidence against 'em."

"Sounds reasonable." The Ranger lifted his heels to the seat of a second chair and rolled him a cigarette.

"You'd find out where they're hidin' the cattle they rustle."

"Are you givin' me an assignment, Captain?"

"You done said it, son. There 's a bunch of rustled stock up in the rocks somewheres. You know it. Question is, can you find the cache?"

"I can try."

"Was n't it you told me once about bumpin' into a rustler doin' business whilst you was ridin' the line?"

"At the mouth of Box Cañon — yes."

"Well, wha 's the matter with you scoutin' up Box Cañon an' seein' what you find?"

"They 're roostin' up there somewheres. I'll bet a hat on that."

"How many boys you want with you?"

Jack considered. "One. I'll take Ridley if you don't mind."

"He 's a tenderfoot," suggested Ellison doubtfully. "Won't be of any help to you a-tall in cutting sign. If you leave him he 's liable to get lost. Better take Moser, had n't you?"

"Rather have Ridley. He does n't claim to know it all. Besides, we 've got to break him in sometime."

"Suits me if he does you. It 's yore party."

"We'll start in the mo'nin'."

"The sooner the quicker," agreed the Captain. "I want the old man to know we 're not spendin' our time settin' around a office. He 's got no call to crawl my hump when you boys are doin' the best you can. Well, go to it, son. See if you-all can get evidence that will stand

up so's we can collect that bunch of hawss-thieves."

Before daybreak the two Rangers were on their way. They drove a pack-horse, their supplies loaded on a sawbuck saddle with kyacks. Jack had been brought up in the Panhandle. He knew this country as a seventh-grade teacher does her geography. Therefore he cut across the desert to the cap-rock, thence to Dry Creek, and so by sunset to Box Cañon. At the mouth of the gulch they slept under the stars. As soon as they had cooked their coffee and bacon Roberts stamped out the fire.

"We don't want to advertise we're here. I'm some particular about my health. I'd hate to get dry-gulched [1] on this job," said Jack.

"Would the Dinsmores shoot us if they found us?" asked Ridley, searching with his head for the softest spot in his saddle for a pillow.

"Would a calf milk its mother? They're sore as a toad at me, an' I expect that goes for any other Ranger too. Homer might give us an even break because we stayed with him on the island, but I'd hate to bet my head on that."

"If we get any evidence against them they can't afford to let us go," agreed Arthur.

"An' if they jump us up, how're they goin' to

[1] A man is said to be "dry-gulched" when he mysteriously disappears, — killed by his enemies and buried under a pile of rocks.

know how much we've seen? There's one safe way, an' they would ce'tainly take it."

"Dead men tell no tales, it's said."

"Some of 'em do an' some don't. I never met up with a proverb yet that was n't 'way off about half the time. For instance, that one you quoted. Rutherford Wadley's body told me considerable. It said that he'd been killed on the bluff above an' flung down; that he'd been shot by a rifle in the hands of a man standin' about a hundred an' fifty yards away; that he'd been taken by surprise an' probably robbed."

"It would n't have told me all that."

"Not till you learn to read sign closer than you do. An outdoor education is like a schoolbook one. You can't learn it in a day or a week or a year."

"You're no Methuselah. There's still hope for me."

"Lots o' hope. It's mostly keepin' yore eyes open an' yore brain workin'. I'm still only in the A B C class, but a fellow learns somethin' every day if he's that kind."

"If it's a matter of brains, why do Indians make the best trailers? You would n't say their brains are as good as a white man's, would you?"

"No; an' I'd say there's nothin' on earth an Indian can do as well as a white man, given the same chance to learn it. Indians know the out-

doors because they have to know it to live. The desert's no prodigal mother. Her sons have to rustle right smart to keep their tummies satisfied. If the 'Paches and the Kiowas did n't know how to cut sign an' read it, how to hunt an' fish an' follow a trail, they'd all be in their happy huntin' grounds long ago. They're what old Nature has made 'em. But I'll tell you this. When a white man gives his mind to it he understands the life of the plains better than any Indian does. His brains are better, an' he goes back an' looks for causes. The best trailers in the world are whites, not redskins."

"I did n't know that," Arthur said.

"Ask any old-timer if it ain't so."

They were eating breakfast when the light on the horizon announced a new day on the way. Already this light was saturating the atmosphere and dissolving shadows. The vegetation of the plains, the wave rolls of the land, the distant horizon line, became more distinct. By the time the sun pushed into sight the Rangers were in the saddle.

Roberts led through the polecat brush to the summit of a little mesa which overlooked the gulch. Along the edge of the ravine he rode, preferring the bluff to the sandy wash below because the ground was less likely to tell the Dinsmores a story of two travelers riding up Box Cañon. At the head of the gorge a faint trail

dipped to the left. Painted on a rock was a sign that Jack had seen before.

THIS IS PETE DINSMORE'S ROAD—
TAKE ANOTHER.

He grinned reminiscently. "I did last time. I took the back trail under orders."

"Whose orders?" asked Ridley.

"Pete's, I reckon."

"If there's a story goes with that grin—" suggested Arthur.

"No story a-tall. I caught a fellow brandin' a calf below the cañon. He waved me around. Some curious to see who the guy was that did n't want to say 'How?' to me, I followed him into Box."

That seemed to be the end of the yarn. At any rate, Jack stopped.

"Well, did you find out who he was?"

"No, but I found this sign, an' above it a rifle slantin' down at me, an' back of the rifle a masked face. The fellow that owned the face advised me about my health."

"What about it?"

"Why, that this rough country was n't suited to my disposition, temperament, an' general proclivities. So I p'inted back to where I had come from."

"And you never satisfied your curiosity about who the rustler was?"

"Did n't I?" drawled Jack.

"Did you?"

"Mebbe I did. I'm not tellin' that yarn — not to-day."

The country was rougher and hillier. The trail they had been following died away in the hills, but they crossed and recrossed others, made by buffaloes, antelopes, and coyotes driven by the spur of their needs in the years that had passed. Countless generations of desert life had come and gone before even the Indians drifted in to live on the buffalo.

"Why is it that there 's more warfare on the desert than there is back East? The cactus has spines. The rattlesnake, the centipede, the Gila monster, the tarantula, all carry poison. Even the toad has a horn. Everywhere it is a fight to survive. The vegetation, as well as the animal life, fights all the time against drought. It 's a regular hell on earth," Arthur concluded.

Jack eased himself in the saddle. "Looks kinda like Nature made the desert an' grinned at life, much as to say, 'I defy you to live there,' don't it? Sure there 's warfare, but I reckon there 's always war between different forms of life. If there was n't, the world would be rank with all sorts of things crowdin' each other. The war would have to come then after all. Me, I like it. I like the way life came back with an answer to the challenge. It equipped itself with spines an'

stings an' horns an' tough hides because it had to have 'em. It developed pores an' stomachs that could get along without much water. Who wants to live in a land where you don't have to rustle for a livin'?"

"You belong to the West. You're of it," Ridley said. "If you'd seen the fine grasslands of the East, the beautiful, well-kept farms and the fat stock, you'd understand what I mean. A fellow gets homesick for them."

Roberts nodded. "I've seen 'em an' I understand. Oncet I went back East an' spent three months there. I could n't stand it. I got sick for the whinin' of a rope, wanted to hump over the hills after cows' tails. The nice little farms an' the nice little people with their nice little ways kinda cramped me. I reckon in this ol' world it 's every one to his own taste." His eye swept the landscape. "Looks like there 's water down there. If so, we 'll fall off for a spell an' rest the hawsses."

CHAPTER XXIX

BURNT BRANDS

At the end of the third day of scouting Jack came back to camp late, but jubilant.

"I've found what we're lookin' for, Art. I drifted across a ridge an' looked down into a draw this evenin'. A fellow was ridin' herd on a bunch of cows. They looked to me like a jackpot lot, but I could n't be sure at that distance. I'm gonna find out what brands they carry."

"How?"

"The only way I know is to get close enough to see."

"Can you do that without being noticed?"

"Mebbe I can. The fellow watchin' the herd ain't expectin' visitors. Probably he loafs on the job some of the time. I'm gamblin' he does."

Roberts unloaded from the saddle the hindquarters of a black-tail deer he had shot just before sunset. He cut off a couple of steaks for supper and Ridley raked together the coals of the fire.

"Throw these into a fry-pan, Art, while I picket old Ten-Penny," said Jack. "I'm sure hungry enough to eat a mail sack. I lay up there

in the brush 'most two hours an' that fellow's cookin' drifted to me till I was about ready to march down an' hold him up for it."

"What 's the programme?" asked Arthur later, as they lay on their tarpaulins smoking post-prandial cigarettes.

"I'll watch for a chance, then slip down an' see what 's what. I want to know who the man is an' what brand the stock are carryin'. That 's all. If it works out right mebbe we'll gather in the man an' drive the herd back to town."

"Then I go along, do I?"

"Yes, but probably you stay back in the brush till I signal for you to come down. We'll see how the thing works out."

Ridley lay awake for hours beneath a million stars, unable to get his alert nerves quiet enough for sleep. The crisis of his adventure was near and his active imagination was already dramatizing it vividly. He envied his friend, who had dropped into restful slumber the moment his head touched the saddle. He knew that Roberts was not insensitive. He, too, had a lively fancy, but it was relegated to the place of servant rather than master.

In the small hours Arthur fell into troubled sleep and before his eyes were fully shut — as it seemed to the drowsy man — he was roused by his companion pulling the blankets from under him. Ridley sat up. The soft sounds of the desert

night had died away, the less subdued ones of day showed that another life was astir.

"Time to get up, Sleepy Haid. Breakfast is ready. Come an' get it," called Jack.

They packed their supplies on the extra horse and saddled their mounts. The day was still young when they struck across the plains to the north. The way they took was a circuitous one, for Roberts was following the draws and valleys as far as possible in order to escape observation.

The sun was high in the heavens when he drew up in the rim-rock.

"We'll 'light here an' picket the broncs," he said.

This done, both men examined their rifles and revolvers carefully to guard against any hitch in the mechanism. Then, still following the low country, they worked forward cautiously for another half-mile.

Jack fell back to give the other Ranger final instructions. "There 's a clump of cactus on the summit. We'll lie back o' there. You stay right there when I go forward. If I get the breaks I'll wave you on later. If I don't get 'em you may have to come a-shootin' to help me."

They crept up an incline, wriggling forward on their stomachs the last few yards to the shelter of the cactus on the crest. Before them lay a little valley. On the cactus-covered slope opposite a herd of cattle was grazing. No guard was in sight.

For two hours they lay there silently, watching intently.

"I'll slip down right now an' take a look at the brands," said Jack.

"Had n't I better come too?"

"You stick right where you 're at, Art. I might need a friend under cover to do some fancy shootin' for me if the Dinsmores arrived unexpected."

There was no cover on the near slope. Jack made no attempt to conceal himself, but strode swiftly down into the valley. Goosequills ran up and down his spine, for he did not know at what moment a bullet might come singing down at him.

He reached the outgrazers of the herd and identified the A T O brand on half a dozen cows. The brand had been changed by an adroit touch or two of a running-iron. Probably the cattle were being held here until the hair had grown again enough to conceal the fact of a recent burn.

The Ranger circled the herd, moving toward the brow of the land swell. He made the most of the cactus, but there was an emptiness about the pit of his stomach. If some one happened to be watching him, a single shot would make an end of Tex Roberts. His scalp prickled and drew tight, as though some unseen hand were dragging at it.

From one clump to another he slipped, every sense keyed to alertness. The rifle in his hand,

resting easily against the right hip, could be lifted instantly.

At the top of the rise the Ranger waited behind a prickly pear to search the landscape. It rolled away in long low waves to the horizon. A mile or more away, to the left, a faint, thin film of smoke hung lazily in the air. This meant a camp. The rustlers, to play safe, had located it not too near the grazing herd. It was a place, no doubt, where water was handy and from which the outlaws, if caught by surprise, could make a safe and swift retreat to the rim-rock.

Again, in a wide circuit in order not to meet anybody who might be riding from the camp to the herd, the Ranger moved forward warily. The smoke trickle was his guide and his destination.

He took his time. He was in no hurry. Speed was the least part of his programme. Far more important was secrecy. With that patience which the frontiersman has learned from the Indian he followed a tortuous course through the brush.

His trained eye told him the best direction for approach, the side from which he could get nearest to the camp with the least risk of being seen. Through the curly mesquite he crawled, hiding behind the short bushlike clumps until he had chosen the next line of advance. At last, screened by a Spanish bayonet, he commanded a view of the camp.

So far as he could tell it was deserted. Camp

equipment lay scattered about. A frying-pan, a coffee-pot, tin cups and plates, had been dropped here and there. The coals of the fire still smouldered and gave forth a wisp of smoke. Fifty yards away a horse was picketed. It was an easy guess that the campers had not gone permanently, but were away from home for a few hours.

Where were they? Recalling the horses he and his companion had left picketed not far away, Jack felt a momentary qualm. If the Dinsmores should happen to stumble on them the situation would be an awkward one. The hunters would become the hunted. Deprived of their horses and supplies, the Rangers would be at a decided disadvantage. The only option left them would be to come to close quarters with the rustlers or to limp back home discouraged and discredited. Roberts preferred not to have his hand forced. He wanted to wait on opportunity and see what it brought him.

He moved forward to the camp and made a swift examination of it. Several men had slept here last night and four had eaten breakfast a few hours since. He could find no extra supplies, which confirmed his opinion that this was only a temporary camp of a night or two. A heavy buzzing of flies in a buffalo wallow not far away drew his steps. The swarm covered a saddle of deer from which enough for a meal had been slashed before it was thrown away.

The Ranger moved nothing. He left no signs other than his tracks to show that a stranger had been at the camp. As soon as he had inspected it he withdrew.

He had decided that the first thing to do was to join Ridley, make sure of their horses, and leave his companion in charge of them. Afterward he could return alone and watch the rustlers.

Since he knew that the rustlers were away from their camp, the Ranger did not feel the need of taking such elaborate precautions against discovery during the return journey. He made a wide circuit, but his long, easy stride carried him swiftly over the ground. Swinging round the valley in which the herd was grazing, he came up from the rear to the brush-covered summit where he had left Ridley.

Arthur had gone. He was nowhere in sight. Nor was there any sign to show where he had gone.

It was possible that some alarm might have sent him back to look after the horses. Jack ran down the incline to the little draw where the animals had been picketed. The broncos were safe, but Ridley was not with them.

CHAPTER XXX

ROGUES DISAGREE

With a heart that pounded queerly Arthur watched his friend cross the valley and work his way to the ridge beyond. Even after Jack had disappeared, he waited, nerves jumpy, for the crack of a rifle to carry news of death in the mesquite.

No tidings of tragedy came. The minutes fulfilled the hour. The many small sounds of the desert were shattered by no report. At last, drowsing in the warmth of the sunlit land, the Ranger's eyes closed, opened, and shut again. He nodded, fell asleep.

When he awakened it was with a shock of dread. His heart died. Four men were watching him. Two of them had him covered with revolvers. A third was just removing noiselessly his rifle and six-shooter from reach of his hand.

He jumped to his feet. The consternation in his eyes showed how completely he had been caught napping.

One of the men — a long, lank, cross-eyed fellow — laughed mockingly, and the sound of his mirth was evil.

"Whatta you doin' here?" demanded one whom he recognized as Pete Dinsmore.

For a moment the Ranger's mind was a blank. He could not make it serve his needs. Words were out of reach of his tongue. Then, "I'm lost," he stammered.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes." Out of his confusion one idea stood up imperatively. He must not betray Jack.

"Where 's yore hawss?"

"It — it got away from me."

"When?"

"Last night." It seemed to him that he could keep just one jump ahead of this dominant man's menacing questions.

"Howcome that?"

"I shot a prairie-hen, and when I got down to get it — I don't know — my horse got frightened and jerked away. I tried to catch it. The brute would n't let me. Then night came."

"What were you doin' so far from town?" cut in one of the two who were covering him. He was a short, heavy-set man.

"That 's right, Dave. Looks funny to me." Gurley seemed fairly to ooze malice. "Just happened to drift here to this herd, I reckon. It sure was yore unlucky day."

Arthur looked from one to another despairingly. He found no hope anywhere, not even in the expressionless face of Homer Dinsmore, who as yet had not spoken a word. There came over the boy what he afterward described as a "gone"

feeling. It was the sensation, intensified many times, felt when an elevator drops from under one in swift descent.

"I — don't know what you mean," he faltered.

"You will," said Gurley brutally.

"Been across the valley to the herd yet?" asked Overstreet, elaborately careless.

Here was one question Ridley could answer with the truth. He spoke swiftly, eagerly. "No."

His questioner exchanged looks with Homer Dinsmore and laughed. The Ranger had betrayed himself. He had been so quick to deny that he had been near the herd that his anxiety gave him away. They knew he suspected them of having rustled the stock grazing on the slope. Very likely he had already verified his doubts as to burnt brands.

Homer Dinsmore spoke for the first time. His voice was harsh. "Why don't you tell the truth? You came to get evidence against us."

"Evidence?" repeated Arthur dully.

"To prove we're rustlin' stock. You know damn well."

"Why, I — I —"

"And you did n't come alone. Ellison never sent a tenderfoot like you out except with others. Where are the rest of yore party? Come through."

"I'm alone." Arthur stuck to that doggedly.

"If he's got a bunch of Rangers back of him

we better burn the wind outa here," suggested Gurley, looking around uneasily.

Overstreet looked at him with scorn and chewed tobacco imperturbably. "Keep yore shirt on, Steve. Time enough to holler when you're hurt."

"I have n't got a bunch of Rangers with me," cried Ridley desperately, beads of sweat on his brow. It had come to him that if he persuaded these men he had no companions with him he would be sealing his doom. They could murder him with impunity. But he could not betray Jack. He must set his teeth to meet the worst before he did that. "I tell you I'm alone. I don't know what you mean about the cattle. I have n't been across the valley. I came here, and I had n't slept all night. So I was all worn out. And somehow I fell asleep."

"All alone, eh?" Pete Dinsmore murmured it suavely. His crafty mind was weighing the difference this made in the problem before the outlaws — the question as to what to do with this man. They could not let him go back with his evidence. It would not be safe to kill him if he had merely strayed from a band of Rangers. But assuming he told the truth, that he had no companions, then there was a very easy and simple way out for the rustlers. The Ranger could not tell what he knew — however much or little that might be — *if he never returned to town.*

"I keep telling you that I'm alone, that I got lost," Arthur insisted. "What would I be doing here without a horse if I had friends?"

"Tha's right," agreed Gurley. "I reckon he got lost like he said."

He, too, by the same process of reasoning as Pete Dinsmore, had come to a similar conclusion. He reflected craftily that Ridley was probably telling the truth. Why should he persist in the claim that he was alone if he had friends in the neighborhood, since to persuade his captors of this was to put himself wholly in their power?

"You're easily fooled, Steve," sneered Homer. "I've camped with this bird, an' I tell you he's got a passel of Rangers with him somewheres. We're standin' here jawin' waitin' for them to round us up, I reckon."

Overstreet looked at Homer. His eyebrows lifted in a slight surprise. He and the younger Dinsmore had been side partners for years. Homer was a cool customer. It was n't like him to scare. There was something in this he did not understand. Anyhow, he would back his pal's play till he found out.

"I expect you're right. We can easy enough prove it. Let's light out for the cap-rock an' hole up for a coupla days. Then one of us will slip out an' see if the herd's still here an' no Rangers in sight. We'll keep this gent a prisoner till we know where we're at? How's that?"

"You talk like we was the United States Army, Dave," growled Pete Dinsmore. "We got no way to take care o' prisoners. I'm for settlin' this thing right here."

The outlaws drew closer together and farther from Ridley. He was unarmed and wholly in their power. If he tried to run he could not get twenty yards. The voices of the men fell.

Arthur began to tremble. His face grew gray, his lips bloodless. On the issue of that conference his life hung. The easiest thing to do would be to make an end of him now. Would they choose that way out of the difficulty? He could see that Gurley had, for the moment at least, joined forces with Homer and Dave Overstreet against Pete, but he could hear none of the arguments.

"You're wrong, Pete. We're playin' safe. That's all. My notion is this guy's tellin' the truth. There's only one thing to do. I don't reckon any of us want him to go back to town. But if we do anything with him here, the Rangers are liable to find his body. Oncet up in the caprock we can dry-gulch him."

The older Dinsmore gave way with an oath. "All right. Have yore own way, boys. Majority rules. We'll postpone this discussion till later."

Gurley brought the horses. Arthur was mounted behind him, his feet tied beneath the belly of the horse. The rustlers rode in pairs, Homer Dinsmore and Overstreet in the rear.

"What makes you think this fellow has friends near, Homer?" asked his companion.

"He does n't know enough to ride alone. But I don't care whether he 's alone or not. I 'm not goin' to have the boy killed. He stood by me on the island to a finish. Of course that would n't go with Steve an' Pete, so I put it on the other ground."

"Want to turn him loose, do you?"

"I'd swear him first to padlock his mouth. He 'd do it, too, if he said so."

"Some risk that, old-timer."

"I got to do it, Dave. Can't throw him down, can I?"

"Don't see as you can. Well, make yore play when you get ready. I'll shove my chips in beside yours. I never yet killed a man except in a fight an' I've got no fancy for beginnin' now."

"Much obliged, Dave."

"How far do you 'low to go? If Pete gets ugly like he sometimes does, he 'll be onreasonable."

"I'll manage him. If he does get set there 'll be a pair of us. Mebbe I 'm just about as stubborn as he is."

"I believe you. Well, I'll be with you at every jump of the road," Overstreet promised.

The discussion renewed itself as soon as the outlaws had hidden themselves in a pocket of the cap-rock. Again they drew apart from their prisoner and talked in excited but reduced voices.

"The Rangers have got no evidence we collected this fellow," argued Gurley. "Say he disappears off'n the earth. Mebbe he died of thirst lost on the plains. Mebbe a buffalo bull killed him. Mebbe —"

"Mebbe he went to heaven in a chariot of fire," drawled Overstreet, to help out the other's imagination.

"The point is, why should we be held responsible? Nobody knows we were within fifty miles of him, doggone it."

"That 's where you 're wrong. The Rangers know it. They 're right on our heels, I tell you," differed Homer Dinsmore.

"We 'll get the blame. No manner o' doubt about that," said Overstreet.

"Say we do. They can't prove a thing — not a thing."

"You talk plumb foolish, Steve. Why don't you use yore brains?" answered Homer impatiently. "We can go just so far. If we overstep the limit this country will get too hot for us. There 'll be a grand round-up, an' we 'd get ours without any judge or jury. The folks of this country are law-abidin', but there 's a line we can't cross."

"That 's all right," agreed Pete. "But there 's somethin' in what Steve says. If this tenderfoot wandered off an' got lost, nobody 's goin' to hold us responsible for him."

"He did n't no such thing get lost. Listen. Tex Roberts was with him the day Steve — fell over the box. Tex was with him when we had the rumpus with the Kiowas on the Canadian. Those lads hunt together. Is it likely this Ridley, who don't know sic' 'em, got so far away from the beaten trails alone? Not in a thousand years. There 's a bunch of Rangers somewheres near. We got to play our hands close, Pete."

"We 're millin' around in circles, Homer. Why does this fellow Ridley claim he 's alone? He must know it 's up to him to persuade us his friends are about two jumps behind us."

"One guess is as good as another. Here 's mine," said Overstreet. "He wants to throw us off our guard. He 's hopin' we 'll pull some fool break an' the Rangers will make a gather of our whole bunch."

"Good enough," said Homer, nodding agreement. "Another thing. This lad Ridley 's not game. But he 's a long way from bein' yellow. He 's not gonna queer the campaign of the Rangers by tellin' what he knows."

"Betcha I can make him talk," boasted Gurley. "Put a coupla sticks between the roots of his fingers an' press —"

"Think we 're a bunch of 'Paches, Steve?" demanded Homer roughly. "Come to that, I'll say plain that I 'm no murderer, let alone torture. I 've killed when I had to, but the other

fellow had a run for his money. If I beat him to the draw that was his lookout. He had no holler comin'. But this kid — not for me."

"Different here," said Pete evenly. "He knew what he was up against when he started. If it was us or him that had to go, I would n't hesitate a minute. Question is, what 's safest for us?"

"The most dangerous thing for us is to harm him. Do that, an' we won't last a month in this country."

"What 's yore idea, then, Homer? We can't hold him till Christmas. Soon as we let him go, he 'll trot back an' tell all he knows," protested his brother irritably.

"What does he know? Nothin' except that we found him when he claimed to be lost an' that we looked after him an' showed him how to get home. Even if he 's seen those cattle he can't prove we burned the brands, can he?"

"No-o."

"In a day or two we 'll take the trail. I 'll put it to Ridley that we have n't time to take him back to town an' that he 'd sure get lost if we turned him loose here. We 'll drop him somewheres on the trail after we 've crossed the line."

"Fine an' dandy," jeered Gurley. "We 'll introduce him to the herd an' take him along so 's he 'll be sure we 're the rustlers."

They wrangled back and forth, covering the

same ground time and again. At last they agreed to postpone a decision till next day.

Homer reported the issue of their debate, colored to suit his purpose, to the white-faced Ranger. "I reckon we'll have to look out for you, Ridley. It would n't do to turn you loose. You'd get lost sure. Mebbe in a day or two some of us will be driftin' in to town an' can take you along."

"If you'd start me in the right direction I think I could find my way back," Arthur said timidly.

"No chance, young fellow. You'll stay right here till we get good an' ready for you to go. See?"

The Ranger did not push the point. He knew very well it would not be of the least use. His fears were temporarily allayed. He felt sure that Homer Dinsmore would put up a stiff argument before he would let him be sacrificed.

CHAPTER XXXI

A PAIR OF DEUCES

FROM the lookout point among the rocks where he was stationed Overstreet shouted a warning to his companions below.

"Fellow with a white flag ridin' in. Looks like he might be a Ranger."

Pete Dinsmore dropped a coffee-pot and took three strides to his rifle. His brother Homer and Steve Gurley garnished themselves promptly with weapons. They joined the lookout, and from the big rocks could see without being seen.

The man coming to their hang-out had a handkerchief or a flour sack tied to the barrel of his rifle and was holding it in the air. He jogged along steadily without any haste and without any apparent hesitation. He was leading a saddled riderless horse.

A rifle cracked.

Pete Dinsmore whirled on Gurley angrily. "What you do that for?"

Malice, like some evil creature, writhed in Gurley's face. "It 's that fellow Roberts. We got him right at last. Leggo my arm."

"I'll beat yore head off if you shoot again. Lucky for you you missed. Don't you see he comes here as a messenger. Ellison musta sent him."

"I don' care how he comes. He'll never go away except feet first." The man who had been horsewhipped by the Ranger was livid with rage.

Dinsmore swung him round by the shoulder savagely. "Who elected you boss of this outfit, Steve? Don't ride on the rope or you'll sure git a fall."

The eyes of Pete were blazing. Gurley gave way sullenly.

"Tha's all right. I ain't aimin' noways to cross you. I can wait to git this fellow if you say so."

The Ranger had pulled up his horse and was waving the improvised flag. Pete gave directions.

"Homer, you an' Dave go down an' find out what he wants. Don't bring him in unless you blindfold him first. We don't wanta introduce him to the place so as he can walk right in again any time."

The two men named walked out to meet the Ranger. They greeted him with grim little nods, which was exactly the salutation he gave them. The hard level eyes of the men met without yielding an eyebeat.

"Don't you know a flag of truce when you see it, Dinsmore?" demanded Roberts.

"Excuse that shot, Mr. Ranger," said Homer evenly. "It was a mistake."

"Gurley does make 'em," returned Jack, guessing shrewdly. "Some day he'll make one too many."

"I take it you came on business."

"Why, yes. Captain Ellison sent me with his compliments to get Ranger Ridley."

"Lost him, have you?"

"You can't exactly call him lost when we know where he is."

"Meanin' that he 's here?"

"You ring the bell first shot."

Overstreet broke in, to mark time. "You think we've got him?"

"We do. Don't you?"

"And Ellison wants him, does he?"

"Wants him worse 'n a heifer cow does her calf." Roberts laughed softly, as though from some fund of inner mirth. "He 's kinda hopin' you 'll prove stubborn so as to give him a chance to come an' get him."

"Where is Ellison?"

The Ranger smiled. "He did n't give me any instructions about tellin' you where he is."

"H'mp! You can come in an' talk with Pete. We 'll have to blindfold you," said Dinsmore.

The envoy made no objections. He dismounted. A bandana was tied across his eyes, and the men led him into the pocket of rock. The handkerchief was removed.

Jack told again what he had come for.

"How did you know we were here?" demanded Pete.

"It 's our business to know such things." Jack

did not think it wise to mention that he had been here once before, the same day he found Rutherford Wadley's body a few miles away at the foot of a bluff.

"Ridley told us he was alone — no Rangers a-tall with him, he said."

"Did he?" Jack showed amusement. "What did you expect him to tell you? He draws pay as a Ranger."

"What 's Ellison's proposition?"

"Captain Ellison has n't any proposition to make, if by that you mean compromise. You 're to turn Ridley over to me. That 's all."

"An' where do we get off?" snorted Pete. "What does that buy us?"

"It buys you six hours' time for a get-away. I've got no business to do it, but I'll promise to loaf around an' not report to Captain Ellison till after noon. I'll go that far."

"I don' know 's we want to make any get-away. We could hold the fort right here against quite a few Rangers, I reckon."

"Suit yourself," said Jack indifferently.

Pete chewed tobacco slowly and looked down sullenly at a flat rock without seeing it. Anger burned in him like a smouldering fire in peat. He hated this man Roberts, and Ellison he regarded as a natural enemy. Nothing would have pleased him more than to settle his feud with the Ranger on the spot with a six-shooter. But that

meant a hurried exit from the Panhandle at a sacrifice of his accumulated profits. This did not suit Dinsmore's plans. His purpose was to leave Texas with enough money to set him up in business in Colorado or Wyoming. It would not do to gratify his revenge just now. Nor did he dare to carry out his threat and let the Rangers attack him. His policy was to avoid any conflict if possible.

"Have to talk it over with the other boys," he said abruptly. "You wait here."

Jack sat down on a rock while the rustlers retired and discussed the situation. There was not room for much difference of opinion. The Rangers had forced their hand. All they could do was to slip out of the rim-rock and make for another zone of safety. This would involve losing the stock they had rustled, but their option was a choice of two evils and this was decidedly the lesser.

Pete announced their decision truculently, his chin thrust out.

"One of these days we'll tangle, you 'n' me, young fellow. But not to-day. Take Ridley an' git out *pronto* before I change my mind. For a plug of tobacco I'd go to foggin' the air right now."

The prisoner was brought forward. His weapons were restored to him. With the long strain of fear lifted at last from his mind, it was hard

for him to keep down a touch of hysterical joy. But he managed to return Jack's casual greeting with one as careless to all appearance.

He had caught the drift of the talk and he played up to his friend promptly. "I was rather lookin' for you or one of the other boys about now, Jack," he said. "Mighty careless of me to get nabbed asleep."

Ten minutes later the two Rangers were outside the pocket riding across the plain.

"Hope Pete won't change his mind an' plump a few bullets at us. He 's a right explosive proposition," said Roberts.

It was all Arthur could do to keep from quickening the pace. His mind would n't be easy until several miles lay between him and his late captors.

"Where 's Captain Ellison waiting?" asked Ridley.

"He 's probably at Tascosa or Mobeetie. I have n't seen him since you have."

"Did n't he send you to the Dinsmores after me?"

"Why, no."

Arthur drew a deep breath of relief. If he had weakened in his story that he was alone and had told the truth, he would have brought ruin upon both himself and his friend.

"You mean you went in there on a pure bluff, knowing how they hated you and what a big chance there was that they would murder you?"

"I took a chance, I reckon. But it looked good to me."

"If I had told them you and I were alone—"

"I figured you would n't do that. I had a notion my bluff would stick. They would n't think I'd come to them unless I had strong backin'. The bigger the bluff the better the chance of its workin'."

"Unless I had told that there were only two of us."

"That was one of the risks I had to gamble on, but I felt easy in my mind about that. You'll notice one thing if you stay with the Rangers, Art. They can get away with a lot of things they could n't pull off as private citizens. The law is back of us, and back of the law is the State of Texas. When it comes to a showdown, mighty few citizens want to get us after them good and hard. We always win in the end. The bad-men all know that."

"Just the same, for cold nerve I never saw the beat of what you did now."

"Sho! Nothin' to that. A pair of deuces is good as a full house when your hand ain't called. We'll swing over to the left here an' gather up that bunch of rustled stock, Art."

Late that afternoon, as they were following the dust of the drive, Ridley voiced a doubt in his heart.

"Is n't there a chance that the Dinsmores will follow us and find out we're alone?"

"Quite a chance," agreed Jack cheerfully. "If so, we're liable to swap bullets yet. But I don't reckon they'll do that hardly. More likely they're hittin' the trail for Palo Duro to hole up."

The outlaws did not molest them during the drive. Four days later they reached town with their thirsty, travel-worn herd.

Captain Ellison was at the hotel and Jack reported to him at once.

The eyes of the little Ranger Chief gleamed. "Good boys, both of you. By dog, the old man won't write me any more sassy letters when he reads what you done. I always did say that my boys —"

" — Were a bunch of triflin' scalawags," Jack reminded him.

The Captain fired up, peppery as ever. "You light outa here and see if a square meal won't help some, you blamed impudent young rascal."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HOLD-UP

When Wadley made to Jack Roberts the offer he had spoken of to his daughter, the face of that young man lighted up at once. But without hesitation he refused the chance to manage the A T O ranch.

"Sorry, but I can't work for you, Mr. Wadley."

The big Texan stiffened. "All right," he said huffily. "Just as you please. I'm not goin' to beg you on my knees to take the best job in the Panhandle. Plenty of good men want it."

The frank smile of the Ranger was disarming. "They don't want it any worse than I do, Mr. Wadley. I'm not a fool. Just because we had a difference oncet, I'm not standin' on my dignity. Nothin' like that. You're offerin' me a big chance — the biggest I'm ever likely to get. When you pick me to boss the A T O under yore orders, you pay me a sure-enough compliment, an' I'd be plumb glad to say yes."

"Well, why don't you?"

"Because the Rangers have got an unfinished job before them here, an' I'm not goin' to leave Captain Ellison in the lurch. I'll stick to my dollar a day till we've made a round-up."

The cattleman clapped him on the shoulder. "That 's right, boy. That 's the way to talk. Make yore clean-up, then come see me. I won't promise to hold this job open, but I want you to talk with me before you sign up with any one else."

But the weeks passed, and the Dinsmores still operated in the land. They worked under cover, less openly than in the old days, but still a storm-center of trouble. It was well known that they set the law at defiance, but no man who could prove it would produce evidence.

Meanwhile spring had made way for summer, and summer was beginning to burn into autumn. The little force of Rangers rode the land and watched for that false move which some day the Dinsmores would make to bring them within reach of the law.

On one of its trips in the early fall, the Clarendon stage left town almost half an hour late. It carried with it a secret, but everybody on board had heard a whisper of it. There was a gold shipment in the box consigned to Tascosa. A smooth-faced Ranger sat beside the driver with a rifle across his knees. He had lately been appointed to the force, and this was one of his first assignments. Perhaps that was why Arthur Ridley was a little conscious of his new buckskin suit and the importance of his job.

The passengers were three. One was a jolly Irish mule-skinner with a picturesque vocabulary

and an inimitable brogue. The second wore the black suit and low-crowned hat of a clergyman, and yellow goggles to protect his eyes from the sun. He carried a roll of Scriptural charts such as are used in Sunday-Schools. The third was an angular and spectacled schoolmarm, for Tascosa was going to celebrate by starting a school.

Most of those on board were a trifle nervous. The driver was not quite at his ease; nor was the shotgun messenger. For somehow word had got out a day or two in advance of the gold shipment that it was to be sent on that date. The passengers, too, had faint doubts about the wisdom of going to Tascosa on that particular trip.

The first twenty miles of the journey were safely covered. The stage drew near to the place where now is located the famous Goodnight cattalo ranch.

From the farther side of a cut in the road came a sharp order to the driver. Two men had ridden out from the brush and were moving beside the stage. Each of them carried a rifle.

The driver leaned backward on the reins with a loud "Whoa!" It was an article of faith with him never to argue with a road-agent.

Ridley swung round to fire. From the opposite side of the road a shot rang out. Two more horsemen had appeared. The reins slid from the hands of the driver, and he himself from the seat. His body struck the wheel on the way to the ground.

The bullet intended for the armed guard had passed through his head.

In the packed moments that followed, a dozen shots were fired, most of them by the outlaws, two by the man on the box. A bullet struck Arthur in the elbow, and the shock of it for a time paralyzed his arm. The rifle clattered against the singletree in its fall. But the shortest of the outlaws was sagging in his saddle and clutching at the pommel to support himself.

From an unexpected quarter there came a diversion. With one rapid gesture the man in the clergyman's garb had brushed aside his yellow goggles; with another he had stripped the outer cover of charts from his roll and revealed a sawed-off shotgun. As he stepped down to the road, he fired from his hip. The whole force of the load of buckshot took the nearest outlaw in the vitals and lifted him from his horse. Before he struck the ground he was dead.

In the flash of an eye the tide of battle had turned. The surprise of seeing the clergyman galvanized into action tipped the scale. One moment the treasure lay unguarded within reach of the outlaws; the next saw their leader struck down as by a bolt from heaven.

The lank bandit ripped out a sudden oath of alarm from behind the handkerchief he wore as a mask and turned his horse in its tracks. He dug home his spurs and galloped for the brow of the

hill. The other unwounded robber backed away more deliberately, covering the retreat of his injured companion. Presently they, too, had passed over the top of the hill and disappeared.

The ex-clergyman turned to the treasure-guard. "How bad is it with you, Art?" he asked gently.

That young man grinned down a little wanly at Jack Roberts. He felt suddenly nauseated and ill. This business of shooting men and being shot at filled him with horror.

"Not so bad. I got it in the arm, Jack. Poor old Hank will never drive again."

The Ranger who had been camouflaged as a clergyman stooped to examine the driver. That old-timer's heart had stopped beating. "He 's gone on his last long trip, Art."

"This schoolmarm lady has fainted," announced the mule-skinner.

"She 's got every right in the world to faint. In Iowa, where she comes from, folks live in peace. Better sprinkle water on her face, Mike."

Jack moved over to the dead outlaw and lifted the bandana mask from the face. "Pete Dinsmore, just like I thought," he told Ridley. "Well, he had to have it — could n't learn his lesson any other way."

Roberts drove the stage with its load of dead and wounded back to Clarendon. As quickly as possible he gathered a small posse to follow the

bandits. Hampered as the outlaws were with a badly wounded man, there was a good chance of running them to earth at last. Before night he and his deputies were far out on the plains following a trail that led toward Palo Duro Cañon.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE MAN WITH THE YELLOW STREAK

NIGHT fell on both a dry and fireless camp for the outlaws who had tried to rob the Clarendon-Tascosa stage. They had covered a scant twenty miles instead of the eighty they should have put behind them. For Dave Overstreet had been literally dying in the saddle every step of the way.

He had clenched his teeth and clung to the pommel desperately. Once he had fainted and slid from his seat. But the bandits could not stop and camp, though Dinsmore kept the pace to a walk.

"Once we reach Palo Duro, we'll hole up among the rocks an' fix you up fine, Dave," his companion kept promising.

"Sure, Homer. I'm doin' dandy," the wounded man would answer from white, bloodless lips.

The yellow streak in Gurley was to the fore all day. It evidenced itself in his precipitate retreat from the field of battle — a flight which carried him miles across the desert before he dared wait for his comrades. It showed again in the proposal which he made early in the afternoon to Dinsmore.

The trio of outlaws had been moving very slowly on account of the suffering of the wounded

man. Gurley kept looking back nervously every few minutes to see if pursuers were visible. After a time he sidled up to Dinsmore and spoke low.

"They'll get us sure if we don't move livelier, Homer."

"How in Mexico can we move faster when Dave can't stand it?" asked Dinsmore impatiently.

"He's a mighty sick man. He had n't ought to be on horseback at all. He needs a doctor."

"Will you go an' get him one?" demanded Homer with sour sarcasm.

"What I say is, let's fix him up comfortable, an' after a while mebbe a posse will come along an' pick him up. They can look after him better than we got a chance to do," argued Gurley.

"And mebbe a posse won't find him — what then?" rasped Dinsmore.

"They will. If they don't, he'll die easy. This is sure enough hell for him now."

"All right. Shall we stop right here with him?"

"That would n't do any good, Homer. The Rangers would get us too."

"I see. Yore idea is to let Dave die easy while we're savin' our hides. Steve, you've got a streak in you a foot wide."

"Nothin' like that, "protested the man with the eyes that did n't track. "I'd stay by him if it was any use. But it ain't. Whyfor should you an' me stretch a rope when we can't help Dave a mite? It ain't reasonable."

Overstreet could not hear what was said, but he guessed the tenor of their talk. "Go ahead, boys, an' leave me. I'm about done anyhow," he said.

"If Gurley has a mind to go, he can. I'll stick," answered Dinsmore gruffly.

But Gurley did not want to go alone. There were possible dangers to be faced that two men could meet a good deal more safely than one. It might be that they would have to stand off a posse. They might meet Indians. The sallow outlaw felt that he could not afford just now to break with his companion. It was not likely that the Rangers would reach them that night, and he guessed craftily that Overstreet would not live till morning. The wound was a very serious one. The man had traveled miles before Dinsmore could stop to give him such slight first aid as was possible, and the jolting of the long horseback ride had made it difficult to stop the bleeding which broke out again and again.

After Dinsmore had eased the wounded man from his horse at dusk and laid him on a blanket with a saddle for a pillow, Overstreet smiled faintly up at him.

"It won't be for long, Homer. You'll be shet of me right soon now," he murmured.

"Don't you talk thataway, Dave. I don't want to be shet of you. After a good night's rest you'll feel a new man."

"No, I've got more than I can pack. It won't be long now. I'm right comfortable here. Steve's in a hurry. You go on an' hit the trail with him."

"Where did you get the notion I was yellow, old-timer? I've hunted in couples with you for years. Do you reckon I'm goin' to run like a cur now you've struck a streak o' bad luck?" asked Dinsmore huskily.

The dying man smiled his thanks. "You always was a stubborn son-of-a-gun, Homer. But Steve, he wants —"

"Steve can go to — Hell Creek, if he's so set on travelin' in a hurry. Here, drink some of this water."

The blanket of darkness fell over the land. Stars came out, at first one or two, then by thousands, till the night was full of them. The wounded man dozed and stirred and dozed again. It was plain that the sands of his life were running low. Dinsmore, watching beside him, knew that it was the ebb tide.

A little after midnight Overstreet roused himself, recognized the watcher, and nodded goodbye.

"So long, Homer. I'm hittin' the home trail now."

His hand groped feebly till it found that of his friend. A few minutes later he died, still holding the strong warm hand of the man who was nursing him.

Dinsmore crossed the hands of the dead outlaw and covered him with a blanket.

"Saddle up, Steve," he told Gurley.

While he waited for the horses, he looked down with a blur over his eyes. He had ridden hard and crooked trails all his life, but he had lost that day his brother and his best friend. The three of them had been miscreants. They had broken the laws of society and had fought against it because of the evil in them that had made them a destructive force. But they had always played fair with each other. They had at least been loyal to their own bad code. Now he was alone, for Gurley did not count.

Presently the other man stood at his elbow with the saddled horses. Dinsmore swung to the saddle and rode away. Not once did he look back, but he had no answer for Gurley's cheerful prediction that now they would reach Palo Duro Cañon all right and would hole up there till the pursuit had spent itself, after which they could amble down across the line to Old Mexico or could strike the Pecos and join Billy the Kid. Only one idea was fixed definitely in his mind, that as soon as he could, he would part company with the man riding beside him.

When day came, it found them riding westward in the direction of Deaf Smith County. The Cañon was not far south of them, but there was no need of plunging into it yet. The pursuit must

be hours behind them, even if their trail had not been lost altogether. They rode easily, prepared to camp at the first stream or water-hole they reached.

"We'll throw off here," Dinsmore decided at the first brook they reached.

They unsaddled and hobbled their horses. While Gurley lighted a fire for the coffee, the other man strolled up the creek to get a shot at any small game he might find. Presently a brace of prairie-chickens rose with a whir of wings. The rifle cracked, and one of them fell fluttering to the ground. Dinsmore moved forward to pick up the bird.

Abruptly he stopped in his stride. He fancied he heard a faint cry. It came again, carried on the light morning breeze. He could have sworn that it was the call of a woman for help.

Dinsmore grew wary. He knew the tricks of the Indians, the wily ways with which they lured men into ambush. There had been rumors for days that the Indians were out again. Yet it was not like Indians to announce their presence before they pounced upon their prey. He moved very slowly forward under cover of the brush along the bed of the stream.

The voice came to him again, closer this time, and in spite of the distance clear as a bell. It was surely that of a white woman in trouble. Still he did not answer as he crept forward up the stream.

Then he caught sight of her — a girl, slim and young, stumbling forward through the grass, exhaustion showing in every line of the body.

She stretched out her hands to him across the space between, with a little despairing cry.

CHAPTER XXXIV

RAMONA GOES DUCK-HUNTING

"I'M going duck-hunting, Daddy," announced Ramona one evening at supper. "Quint Sullivan is going with me. We're to get up early in the morning and leave before daybreak."

They had been back at the ranch several weeks, and 'Mona was tired of practicing on the piano and reading Scott's novels after her work about the house was done. She was restless. Her father had noticed it and wondered why. He would have been amazed to learn that the longing to see or hear about a certain brindle-haired former line-rider of his had anything to do with her unrest. Indeed, Ramona did not confess this even to herself. She tried to think that she had been cooped up in the house too long. Hence the duck-hunting as an escape.

"All right, honey. I'll give Quint notice who his boss is to-morrow."

"I've already given him his orders, Dad," his daughter said, with a saucy little *moue* at her father.

Clint chuckled. "'Nough said. When you give orders I take a back seat. Every rider on the place knows that. I'm the most henpecked dad in Texas."

By daybreak Ramona and her escort were several miles from the ranch on their way to the nearest lake. Quint was a black-haired, good-looking youth who rode the range for the A T O outfit. Like most of the unmarried men about her between the ages of fifteen and fifty, he imagined himself in love with the daughter of the boss. He had no expectation whatever of marrying her. He would as soon have thought of asking Wadley to give him a deed to the ranch as he would of mentioning to Ramona the state of his feelings. But that young woman, in spite of her manner of frank innocence, knew quite accurately how matters stood, just as she knew that in due time Quint would transfer his misplaced affections to some more reciprocal object of them.

Her particular reason for selecting Quint as her companion of the day was that he happened to be a devoted admirer of Jack Roberts. All one needed to do was to mention the Ranger to set him off on a string of illustrative anecdotes, and Ramona was hungry for the very sound of his name. One advantage in talking to young Sullivan about his friend was that the ingenuous youth would never guess that the subject of their conversation had been chosen by her rather than by him.

"Did I ever tell you, Miss Ramona, about the time Texas an' me went to Denver? Gentlemen, hush! We ce'tainly had one large time."

"You boys ought not to spend your time in the saloons whenever you go to town. It is n't good for you," reproved the sage young woman who was "going-on seventeen."

She was speaking for a purpose, and Quint very innocently answered the question in her mind.

"No, ma'am. I reckon you're right. But we did n't infest the saloons none that time. Texas, he's one of these here good bad-men. He's one sure-enough tough nut, an' I'd hate to try to crack him, but the queer thing is he don't drink or chew or go hellin' around with the boys. But, say, he's some live lad, lemme tell you. What do you reckon he pulled off on me whilst we was in Denver?"

"Some foolishness, I suppose," said Ramona severely, but she was not missing a word.

"He meets up with a newspaper guy an' gets to fillin' him plumb full o' misinformation about me. To hear him tell it I was the white-haired guy from the Panhandle an' had come to Denver for to hunt a girl to marry. Well, that reporter he goes back an' writes a piece in his paper about how it was the chance of a lifetime for any onmarried fe-male, of even disposition an' pleasin' appearance, between the ages of twenty an' thirty-five, to marry a guaranteed Texas cow-puncher, warranted kind an' sound an' to run easy in double harness. An' would the ladies

please come early to the St. Peter hotel an' inquire for Mr. Quint Sullivan."

"Did any of them come?" asked Ramona, her eyes dancing.

"Did they? Wow! They swarmed up the stairs an' crowded the elevators, while that doggoned Tex sicked 'em on me. Honest, I did n't know there was so many onmarried ladies in the world."

"How did you escape?" asked the girl, well aware that he was drawing the long bow.

"Ma'am, the fire department rescued me. But I ce'tainly did lie awake the balance of the trip tryin' to get even with Jack Roberts. But it 's no manner of use. He lands right-side up every time."

After they had reached Crane Lake the cowpuncher tied the horses while Ramona started around to the far side, following the shore line and keeping her eyes open for ducks. The girl made a half-circuit of the lake without getting a shot. There were ducks enough to be seen, but as yet none of them were within range.

It might have been half an hour after Ramona left Sullivan that there came a shot from the other side of the lake. It was followed almost immediately by a second, a third, and a fourth. 'Mona caught sight of Quint running fast toward the horses. Her heart felt a sudden constriction as of an iron band tightening upon it, for half a dozen mounted Indians were in hot pursuit. She saw the boy reach the nearest bronco, jerk loose

the bridle rein, vault to the saddle, and gallop away, lying low on the back of the horse. The Indians fired from their horses as they rode, but the man flying for his life did not take time to shoot.

For a moment 'Mona stood in plain view by the lake shore. Then she dropped among the rushes, her heart fluttering wildly like that of a forest bird held captive in the hand. She was alone, at the mercy of twoscore of hostile Indians. They would know that the cowboy had a companion because of the second bronco, and as soon as they returned from the pursuit they would begin a search for her. Perhaps they might not even wait till then. 'Mona lay there in despair while one might have counted a hundred. During that time she gave herself up for lost. She could neither move nor think. But presently there flowed back into her heart a faint hope. Perhaps she had not yet been seen. There was a little arroyo farther to the left. If she could reach it, still unnoticed, at least she could then run for her life.

She crept through the rushes on hands and knees, sinking sometimes wrist-deep in water. There was one stretch of perhaps thirty yards at the end of the rushes that had to be taken without cover. She flew across the open, a miracle of supple lightness, reached the safety of the little gulch, and ran as she had never run before. Every moment she expected to hear the crash of the pursuers breaking through the brush.

On the ranch she had lived largely an outdoor life, and in spite of her slenderness was lithe and agile. Beneath her soft flesh hard muscles flowed, for she had known the sting of sleet and the splash of sun. But the rapid climb had set her heart pumping fast. Her speed began to slacken.

Near the summit was a long, uptilted stratum of rock which led to the left and dipped over the ridge. She followed this because no tracks would here betray where she had escaped. For almost a quarter of a mile she descended on the outcropping quartz, flying in an ecstasy of terror from the deadly danger that might at any instant appear on the crest of the divide behind her.

Ramona came to a cleft in the huge boulder, a deep, narrow gash that looked as if it might have been made by a sword stroke of the gods. She peered into the shadowy gulf, but could not see the bottom of the fissure. A pebble dropped by her took so long to strike that she knew the chasm must be deep.

If she could get down into it, perhaps she might hide from the savages. It was her one possible chance of escape. The girl moved along the edge of the precipice trying to find a way down that was not sheer. An arrowweed thicket had struggled up from a jutting spar of rock. Below this was a ridge where her foot might find a support. Beyond was a rock wall that disappeared

into empty space. But 'Mona could not choose. She must take this or nothing.

By means of the arrowweed she lowered herself over the edge while her foot groped for the spar of quartz. Her last look up the hill showed Indians pouring across the ridge in pursuit. Without hesitation she chose the chances of death in the cavern to the certainty of the torture waiting for her outside. Foot by foot she lowered herself, making the most of every irregularity in the rock wall that offered a grip for hand or foot. The distance down seemed interminable. She worked herself into a position where she could move neither up nor down. While her foot was searching for a brace one of her hands slipped and she went the rest of the way with a rush.

For a time she lay there in the darkness, shaken and bruised by the fall, a sharp pain shooting through one of her legs just above the ankle. During those minutes of daze voices came to her from the slit of light above. The painted face of an Apache leaned over the edge of the wall and looked into the gulf.

The girl made not the least movement. She did not stir to relieve the pain of her leg. Scarcely did she dare breathe lest the sound of it might reach those above.

The Apaches began to fire into the fissure. Ramona noiselessly dragged herself close to the overhanging wall. Shot after shot was flung into

the cavern at random. Fortunately for Ramona the strain of the situation relaxed abruptly. A wave of light-headedness seemed to carry her floating into space. She fainted.

When she came to herself no sound reached the girl from above. The Indians had no doubt concluded that their victim was not in the cavern and taken up the pursuit again. But she knew the cunning of the Apache. Probably one or two braves had been left to watch the cleft. She lay quite still and listened. All she could hear was the fearful beating of her heart.

For hours she lay there without making a sound. The patience of the Apache is proverbial. It was possible they knew where she was and were waiting for her to deliver herself to them.

'Mona had one ghastly comfort. The little revolver she had brought along with which to shoot rattlesnakes was still in its scabbard by her side. If they would give her only a moment or two of warning, she would never fall alive into the hands of the redskins.

Time was unmarked for her in the darkness of the cavern. She could not tell whether it was still morning or whether the afternoon was nearing an end. Such a day, so full of dreadful horrors, so long from morning till night, she had never before passed. It seemed to her that a week of hours had come and gone before the light above began to fade.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DESERT

It was only recently that Clint Wadley had become a man of wealth, and life in the Panhandle was even yet very primitive according to present-day standards. There was no railroad within one hundred and fifty miles of the A T O ranch. Once in two weeks one of the cowboys rode to Clarendon to get the mail and to buy small supplies. Otherwise contact with the world was limited to occasional visits to town.

As a little girl Ramona had lived in a one-room house built of round logs, with a stick-and-mud chimney, a door of clapboards daubed with mud at the chinks, and a dirt floor covered with puncheons. She had slept in a one-legged bedstead fitted into the wall, through the sides and ends of which bed, at intervals of eight inches, holes had been bored to admit of green rawhide strips for slats. She had sat on a home-made three-legged stool at a home-made table in homespun clothes and eaten a dish of cush[1] for her supper. She had watched her aunt make soap out of lye dripping from an ash-hopper. The only cooking utensils in the house had been a Dutch oven, a three-legged

[1] Cush is made of old corn bread and biscuits in milk, beaten to a batter and fried in bacon grease with salt.

skillet, a dinner-pot, a tea-kettle, a big iron shovel, and a pair of pot-hooks suspended from an iron that hung above the open fire.

But those were memories of her childhood in southern Texas. With the coming of prosperity Clint had sent his children to Tennessee to school, and Ramona had been patiently trained to the feebleness of purpose civilization in those days demanded of women of her class and section. She had been taught to do fancy needlework and to play the piano as a parlor accomplishment. It had been made plain to her that her business in life was to marry and keep the home fires burning, and her schooling had been designed, not to prepare her as a mate for her future husband, but to fit her with the little graces that might entice him into choosing her for a wife.

Upon her return to the ranch Ramona had compromised between her training and her inheritance. She took again to horseback riding and to shooting, even though she read a good deal and paid due attention to her pink-and-white complexion.

So that when she looked up from the cavern in which she was buried and caught a gleam of a star in the slit of blue sky above, she was not so helpless as her schooling had been designed to make her. The girl was compact of supple strength. Endurance and a certain toughness of fiber had come to her from old Clint Wadley.

She began the climb, taking advantage of every bit of roughness, of every projection in the almost sheer wall. A knob of feldspar, a stunted shrub growing from a crevice, a fault in the rock structure, offered here and there toe- or hand-holds. She struggled upward, stopped more than once by the smooth surface against which her soft warm body was pressing. On such occasions she would lower herself again, turn to the right or the left, and work toward another objective.

Ramona knew that the least slip, the slightest failure of any one of her muscles, would send her plunging down to the bottom of the crevasse. The worst of it was that she could not put any dependence upon her injured leg. It might see her through or it might not.

It was within a few feet of the top, just below the arrowweed bush, that she came to an *impasse*. The cold wall offered no hand-hold by which she could gain the few inches that would bring her within reach of the bunched roots. She undid her belt, threw one end of it over the body of the bush, and worked it carefully down until she could buckle it. By means of this she went up hand over hand till she could reach the arrowweed. Her knee found support in the loop of the belt, and in another moment she had zigzagged herself inch by inch over the edge to the flat surface above.

No sign of the Apaches was to be seen. 'Mona

recovered her belt and began to move up the rock spur toward the summit of the hill. A sound stopped her in her tracks. It was the beating of a tom-tom.

She knew the Indians must be camped by the lake. They were probably having a feast and dances. In any case she could not strike direct for home. She must keep on this side of the hill, make a wide circuit, and come in from the west.

Already her leg was paining her a good deal. Since five o'clock in the morning she had eaten nothing. Her throat was parched with thirst. But these were details that must be forgotten. She had to tramp more than twenty miles through the desert regardless of her physical condition.

The girl went at it doggedly. She limped along, getting wearier every mile of the way. But it was not until she discovered that she was lost to all sense of direction that she broke down and wept. The land here was creased by swales, one so like another that in the darkness she had gone astray and did not know north from south.

After tears came renewed resolution. She tried to guide herself by the stars, but though she could hold a straight course there was no assurance in her mind that she was going toward the A T O. Each step might be taking her farther from home. A lime kiln burned in her throat. She was so worn out from lack of food and the tremendous strain under which she had been carry-

ing on that her knees buckled under her weight as she stumbled through the sand. The bad ankle complained continuously.

In this vast solitude there was something weird and eerie that shook her courage. Nor was the danger all fantastic imaginings. The Indians might yet discover her. She might wander far from beaten trails of travel and die of thirst as so many newcomers had done. Possibilities of disaster trooped through her mind.

She was still a child, on the sunny side of seventeen. So it was natural that when she sat down to rest her ankle she presently began to sob again, and that in her exhaustion she cried herself to sleep.

When her eyes opened, the sun was peeping over the desert horizon. She could tell directions now. The A T O ranch must be far to the northeast of where she was. But scarcely a mile from her ran a line of straggling brush. It must be watered by a stream. She hobbled forward painfully to relieve the thirst that was already a torment to her.

She breasted the rise of a little hill and looked down a gentle slope toward the thicket. For a moment her heart lost a beat. A trickle of smoke was rising from a camp-fire and a man was bending over it. He was in the clothes of a white man. Simultaneously there came to her the sound of a shot.

From her parched throat there came a bleating little cry. She hurried forward, and as she went she called again and still again. She was pitifully anxious lest the campers ride away before they should discover her.

A man with a gun in his hand moved toward her from the creek. She gave a little sobbing cry and stumbled toward him.

CHAPTER XXXVI

HOMER DINSMORE ESCORTS RAMONA

"I'm lost!" cried Ramona.

"Where from?" asked Dinsmore.

"From the A T O."

"You're Clint Wadley's daughter, then?"

She nodded. "We met Indians. I . . . got away."

The girl knelt beside the brook, put her hands on two stones that jutted up from the water, and drank till her thirst was assuaged.

"I'm hungry," she said simply, after she had risen.

He led her back to the camp-fire and on the way picked up the bird he had shot. 'Mona saw that he noticed her limp, though he said nothing about it.

"I had an accident," she explained. "Fell down a rock wall while I was getting away from the 'Paches."

"They're out again, are they — the devils?" He asked another question. "You said 'we.' Who was with you when the Indians took after you?"

"Quint Sullivan. I was on the other side of Crane Lake from him and heard shots. I saw Quint running for the horses with the 'Paches after him."

"Did he get away?"

She shuddered. "He reached the horses. They rode after him. I don't know whether . . . " Her voice thinned away.

The man at the camp-fire turned, and at sight of them dropped a sudden, startled oath.

Ramona looked at him, then at Dinsmore. A faint tremor passed through her slight body. She knew now who these men were.

"What 's *she* doin' here?" demanded Gurley.

"She 's lost. The 'Paches are out, Steve."

"Where are they?"

"Up at Crane Lake last night."

"Are they headed this way?"

"Don't know. She" — with a jerk of his thumb toward Ramona — "bumped into 'em an' got away."

"We 'd better light a shuck out o' here," said Gurley, visibly disturbed.

"Why? They ain't liable to come this way more than any other. We 'll have breakfast an' talk things over. Fix up this bird, Steve. Cook it in the skillet. She 's hungry."

Ramona observed that both the men referred to her as *she* whenever any reference was made to her.

While they ate breakfast the girl told the story of her experience. Dinsmore watched her with a reluctant admiration. The lines of her figure drooped with weariness, but fatigue could not blot out the grace of her young vitality.

"When can we start for home?" Ramona asked after she had eaten.

"For the A T O?" asked the lank, sallow outlaw brutally. "What's ailin' you? Think we're goin' to take you home with the 'Paches between us an' there? We ain't plumb crazy."

"But I must get home right away. My father — he'll be frightened about me."

"Will he?" jeered Gurley. "If he knew you was in such good company he'd be real easy in his mind." The man flashed a look at her that made the girl burn with shame.

"We could go round an' miss the 'Paches," suggested Ramona timidly.

"Forget that notion," answered Gurley, and there was a flash of cruelty in his eyes. "Mebbe you misremember that I'm obligated to you, miss, for what that condemned Ranger Roberts did to me when I fell over the box in front of the store. We'll settle accounts whilst you're here, I reckon."

The girl appealed to Dinsmore. "You're not going to let him . . . mistreat me, are you?"

The pathos of her situation, the slim, helpless, wonderful youth of the girl, touched the not very accessible heart of Dinsmore.

"You bet I'm not. He'll cut out that kind o' talk right now," he said.

The eyes of Ramona met his, and she knew she was safe. This man had the respect for a good woman that was characteristic of the turbulent

West in its most lawless days. He might be a miscreant and a murderer, but he would fight at the drop of a hat in response to the appeal of any woman who was "straight."

"Playin' up to Clint, are you, Homer?" sneered the other man. "You better take her straight home like she wants, since you're so friendly to the family."

"That's exactly what I'm goin' to do," retorted Dinsmore. "Any objections?"

Gurley dropped his sneer instantly. His alarm voiced itself in a wheedling apology. "I did n't go for to rile you, Homer. O' course you cayn't do that. We got to stick together. The Indians is one reason. An' there's another. No need for me to tell you what it is."

"You'll have to wait for me in the cañon till I get back. It's not far from here to you-know-where. I'm goin' to take the horses an' see this girl back to her home."

"You're good," Ramona said simply.

"You're not figurin' on takin' my horse, are you?" Gurley burst out with an oath.

"You've done guessed it, Steve. You'll have to hoof it into the cañon."

"Like hell I will. Take another think, my friend."

The eyes of the men clashed, one pair filled with impotent rage, the other cold and hard as polished steel on a frosty morning.

Gurley yielded sullenly. "It 's no square deal, Homer. We did n't bring her here. Why cayn't she go along with us an' hole up till the 'Paches are gone an' till . . . things kinda settle down?"

"Because she 's got no business with folks like us. Her place is back at the A T O, an' that 's where I aim to take her. She 's had one hell of a time, if you ask me. What that kid needs is for her home folks to tuck her up in bed an' send her to sleep. She 's had about all the trouble a li'l' trick like her can stand, I should n't wonder."

"You ain't her nurse," growled Gurley.

"That 's why I'm goin' to take her home to those that are. 'Nuff said, Steve. What I say goes."

"You act mighty high-heeled," grumbled the other man.

"Mebbeso," replied Dinsmore curtly. "Saddle the horses, Steve."

"I dunno as I'm yore horse-rustler," mumbled Gurley, smothering his sullen rage. None the less he rose slowly and shuffled away toward the hobbled horses.

'Mona touched Dinsmore on the sleeve. Her soft eyes poured gratitude on him. "I'll remember this as long as I live. No matter what anybody says I'll always know that you 're good."

The blood crept up beneath the tan of the outlaw's face. It had been many years since an innocent child had made so naïve a confession of

faith in him. He was a bad-man, and he knew it. But at the core of him was a dynamic spark of self-respect that had always remained alight. He had ridden crooked trails through all his gusty lifetime. His hand had been against every man's, but at least he had fought fair and been loyal to his pals. And there had never been a time when a good woman need be afraid to look him in the face.

"Sho! Nothin' to that. I gotta take you home so as you won't be in the way," he told her with a touch of embarrassed annoyance.

No man alive knew this country better than Homer Dinsmore. Every draw was like its neighbor, every rolling rise a replica of the next. But the outlaw rode as straight a course as if his road had been marked out for him by stakes across the plains. He knew that he might be riding directly toward a posse of Rangers headed for Palo Duro to round up the stage robbers. He could not help that. He would have to take his chance of an escape in case they met such a posse.

The sun climbed high in the heavens.

"How far do you think we are now from the ranch?" asked Ramona.

"'Most twenty miles. We've been swingin' well to the left. I reckon we can cut in now."

They climbed at a walk a little hill and looked across a wide sweep of country before them. Ramona gave a startled cry and pointed an out-

stretched finger at some riders emerging from a dry wash.

"'Paches!" cried Dinsmore. "Back over the hill, girl."

They turned, but too late. On the breeze there came to them a yell that sent the blood from 'Mona's heart.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ON A HOT TRAIL

ROBERTS picked up from the fort a Mescalero Apache famous as a trailer. He reckoned to be rather expert in that line himself, but few white men could boast of such skill as old Guadaloupe had.

Jumbo Wilkins was one of the posse Jack had hastily gathered. "I'm good an' glad I was in town an' not out herdin' *vacas*, Tex. A fellow kinda needs a little excitement oncet in a while. I got a hunch we're goin' to git these birds this time."

"You're the greatest little optimist I ever did see, Jumbo," answered the Ranger with a smile. "We're goin' to strike a cold trail of men who know every inch of this country an' are ridin' hell-for-leather to make a get-away. We're liable to ride our broncs to shadows an' never see hair or hide of the fellows we want. I'd like to know what license you've got for yore hunch."

"You're such a lucky guy, Tex. If you was lookin' for a needle in a haystack you'd find it in yore mouth when you picked up a straw to chew on."

"Lucky, nothin'. A man makes his own luck, I always did tell you, an' I have n't bumped into

any yet. You don't see any big bunch of fat cows with my brand on 'em, do you? I'm pluggin' along for a dollar a day with a promise from Cap Ellison that I'll probably cash in soon with my boots on. Old Man Luck always hides behind the door when I pass, if there 's any such Santa Claus in the business."

"All the way you look at it. Did n't Clint Wadley offer you the job of bossin' the best cow-ranch in the Panhandle?"

"An' did n't I have to turn down his offer an' hang on to a dollar-a-day job?"

"Then you saved Miss 'Mona from that bull an' made a friend of her."

"Yes, an' then I butted in an' kept the Kiowas from mussin' up Art Ridley, who is liable to ask me to stand up with him when he marries Miss Ramona," added the Ranger.

"Shucks! She'll never marry Ridley so long as you're runnin' around unbranded, son."

"A lot you know about girls, Jumbo," said Roberts with a rueful grin. "I don't know sic' 'em about the things they like. I'm one chaparral-raised roughneck. That little lady never wasted two thoughts on me. But Art — he knows a lot about books an' style an' New York's four hundred. He 's good to look at, clean, knows how to talk, an' makes a sure-enough hit with the girls."

"He 's a sissy boy beside you. No Texas girl would look twice —"

"Nothin' a-tall to that. Did n't he save Clint Wadley's life? Did n't he stay by Dinsmore when the Kiowas had 'em holed? He fought good enough to get shot up this mo'nin', did n't he? No, sir. You'll find he 's got me backed off the map so far as Miss Ramona goes. I know it, old-timer."

"Where do you get that notion you 're a roughneck, Tex?" asked Jumbo. "You've read more books than any man on the range. You don't hell around like most of the boys. You don't drink. Mebbe you ain't exactly pretty, but yore face does n't scare critters when they see it onexpected. An' when the band begins to play — Gentlemen, watch Tex."

"If the girls would only let you do the pickin' for 'em, Jumbo," suggested Roberts with his sardonic smile.

Through rabbit weed and curly mesquite, among the catclaw and the prickly pear, they followed the faint ribbon trail left by the outlaws in their retreat from the scene of the hold-up.

When it was too late to cut sign any longer, the Ranger gave orders to throw in to a small draw where the grass was good. At daybreak they were on the trail again and came within the hour to the body of Overstreet. They dug a grave in a buffalo run with their knives and buried the body as well as they could before they picked up again the tracks of two horses now traveling much faster.

"They're headin' for Palo Duro, looks like," commented Roberts.

"Looks like," agreed his friend.

Early in the afternoon the posse reached the little creek where the outlaws had breakfasted. Old Guadaloupe criss-crossed the ground like a bloodhound as he read what was written there. But before he made any report Roberts himself knew that a third person had joined the fugitives and that this recruit was a woman. The Ranger followed the Apache upstream, guessed by some feathers and some drops of blood that one of the outlaws had shot a prairie-hen, and read some hint of the story of the meeting between the woman and the bandit.

Was this woman some one who had been living in Palo Duro Cañon with the outlaws? Or was this meeting an accidental one? The odd thing about it was that there was no sign of her horse. She had come on foot, in a country where nobody ever travels that way.

Roberts told Guadaloupe to find out where the party had gone from the camp. He himself followed into the desert the footsteps of the woman who had come across it toward the creek. He was puzzled and a little disturbed in mind. She had not come from the cañon. What was a woman doing alone and on foot in this desert empty of human life for fifty miles or more?

He found no answer to his questions and re-

luctantly returned to the camp-fire. Guadaloupe was ready with his report. One man had started out on foot along the edge of the cañon. The other man and the woman had struck on horseback across the plain.

"We'll follow those on horseback," decided the Ranger at once. He could not have told why the urgent impulse was on him to do this, nor why he did not split his party and send part of his men in pursuit of the foot traveler. Later he laid it to what Jumbo would have called a hunch.

He was puzzled by the direction the two riders were taking. It led neither to the A T O nor to Tascosa, and was making no account of the streams where the travelers would have to find water. They seemed to be plunging ignorantly into the desert, but since Gurley or Dinsmore was one of the two this could not be. Either of these men could have traveled the Panhandle blindfolded.

They followed the tracks for hours. The line of travel was so direct that it told of purpose. Dinsmore — if the man were Dinsmore — evidently knew just what he was doing. Then, abruptly, the tracks pointed to the right, straight for the A T O.

But not for long. At the summit of a little rise the riders had plainly stopped for a few moments, then had turned and galloped fast for the southwest. The lengthening tracks, the sharpness of

them, the carelessness with which the riders took the rougher ground to follow a straight line, all suggested an urgent and imperative reason.

That reason became plain to Roberts in another minute. A great number of tracks swept in from the left and blotted out those of the two flying riders.

"Chiricahua Apaches," grunted Guadaloupe. The scout had a feud with that branch of the tribe and was at war with them.

"How many?" questioned Jack.

The Indian held up the fingers of both hands, closed them, opened them, and a third time shut and lifted the fingers.

"Thirty?" asked the Ranger.

The Apache nodded.

"Dinsmore 's makin' for Palo Duro," remarked Wilkins as they followed at a canter the plain trail marked for them. "I'll bet he don't throw down on himself none on that race either. He 's sure hell-bent on gettin' there."

One of the riders called to the Rangers. "Look over to the left, Tex. We got company."

A little group of riders — three, four, five of them — emerged from behind a clump of Spanish bayonet and signaled with a bandana handkerchief. As they rode closer the heart of the Ranger died under his ribs. His stomach muscles tightened, and he felt a prickling of the skin run down his back. For Clint Wadley rode at the head of

these men, and like a flash of lightning the truth had seared across the brain of Jack Roberts. His daughter was the woman riding to escape from the savages.

The face of Wadley confirmed the guess of the Ranger. On the unshaven face of the cattleman dust was caked. His eyes were red and inflamed from the alkali and the tears he had fought back fifty times. The expression of the man was that of one passing through the torments of hell.

In five broken sentences he told his story. Quint Sullivan, escaping from his pursuers after a thirty-mile run, had reached the ranch in the middle of the night. Clint had gathered together such men as were at hand and started at once. At Crane Lake he had found no trace of her. He could not escape the conviction that the Apaches had captured Ramona and taken her with them.

On this last point the Ranger offered him comfort, though it was sorry comfort at that. Five hours ago she was still safe, but in terrible danger.

"Dinsmore 's a man — none gamer in Texas, Mr. Wadley. He won't desert her," said Jumbo. "You could n't 'a' picked a better man to look out for her."

"How do you know it 's Dinsmore? Perhaps it 's that yellow wolf Gurley," answered the father out of his tortured heart.

Jack was riding on the other side of Wadley. He, too, carried with him a private hell of fear

in his heart, but he knew that the big cattleman was nearly insane with anxiety.

"Because the man with Miss Ramona was takin' her back to the ranch when they bumped into the 'Paches. You know Steve Gurley would never have taken her home in the world," replied the Ranger.

"What can one man do against thirty? He'll do what Quint here did — run to save his own hide."

Young Sullivan winced. It was the truth. He had run and left the girl to the mercy of these devils. But his one chance of helping her had been to run. He tried to say as much.

"I know that, Quint. I'm not blamin' you," broke out the father in his agony. "But my little lamb — in the hands of 'Paches — God!" Wadley covered his eyes with his hand and tried to press back from his brain the horrible visions he kept seeing.

Jumbo stuck to his one valid point. " Bite yore teeth into this, Clint. She 's got ridin' beside her as game a man as ever threw his leg over leather. He knows this country like you do yore ranch. He'll hole up in Palo Duro where the 'Paches won't find 'em, an' if the devils do he'll sure stand 'em off till we blow in."

His friend on the other side of the cattleman backed him up strongly, but the heart of the Ranger was heavy with dread.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

DINSMORE TO THE RESCUE

If 'Mona lives to be eighty the high-lights of that wild ride will never fade from her memory. The mesas rolled in long swells as far as the eye could see. Through the chaparral the galloping horses plunged while the prickly pear and the cholla clutched at their flanks and at the legs of the riders. Into water-gutted arroyos they descended, slid down breakneck shale ridges, climbed like heather cats the banks of dry washes, pounded over white porous *malpais* on which no vegetation grew.

Now Dinsmore was in front of her picking out the best way, now he was beside her with cool, easy words of confidence, now he rode between her and the naked Apaches, firing with deliberate and deadly accuracy.

"Don't look back," he warned her more than once. "My job is to look out for them. Yours is to see yore horse don't throw you or break a leg in a prairie-dog hole. They cayn't outrun us. Don't worry about that."

The man was so easy in manner, apparently so equal to the occasion, that as the miles slid behind them her panic vanished. She felt for the small revolver in her belt to make sure it was safe.

If she should be thrown, or if her horse should be shot, one thing must be done instantly. She must send a bullet crashing into her brain.

To the right and to the left of her jets of dirt spat up where the shots of the Indians struck the ground. Once or twice she looked back, but the sight of the bareback riders at their heels so unnerved her that she obeyed the orders of her companion and resisted the dreadful fascination of turning in her saddle.

It had seemed to 'Mona at first with each backward glance that the Indians were gaining fast on them, but after a time she knew this was not true. The sound of their shots became fainter. She no longer saw the spitting of the dust from their bullets and guessed they must be falling short.

Her eyes flashed a question at the man riding beside her. "We're gaining?"

"That's whatever. We'll make the cañon all right an' keep goin'. Don't you be scared," he told her cheerfully.

Even as he spoke, Ramona went plunging over the head of her horse into a bunch of shin-oak. Up in an instant, she ran to remount. The bronco tried to rise from where it lay, but fell back helplessly to its side. One of its fore legs had been broken in a prairie-dog hole.

Dinsmore swung round his horse and galloped back, disengaging one foot from the stir-

rup. The girl caught the hand he held down to her and leaped up beside the saddle, the arch of her foot resting lightly on the toe of his boot. Almost with the same motion she swung astride the cow-pony. It jumped to a gallop and Ramona clung to the waist of the man in front of her. She could hear plainly now the yells of the exultant savages.

The outlaw knew that it would be nip and tuck to reach Palo Duro, close though it was. He abandoned at once his hopes of racing up the cañon until the Apaches dropped the pursuit. It was now solely a question of speed. He must get into the gulch, even though he had to kill his bronco to do it. After that he must trust to luck and hold the redskins off as long as he could. There was always a chance that Ellison's Rangers might be close. Homer Dinsmore knew how slender a thread it was upon which to hang a hope, but it was the only one they had.

His quirt rose and fell once, though he recognized that his horse was doing its best. But the lash fell in the air and did not burn the flank of the animal. He patted its neck. He murmured encouragement in its ear.

"Good old Black Jack, I knew you would n't throw down on me. Keep a-humpin', old-timer. . . . You're doin' fine. . . . Here we are at Palo Duro. . . . Another half-mile, pal."

Dinsmore turned to the left after they had

dropped down a shale slide into the cañon. The trail wound through a thick growth of young foliage close to the bed of the stream.

The man slipped down from the back of the laboring horse and followed it up the trail. Once he caught a glimpse of the savages coming down the shale slide and took a shot through the brush.

"Got one of their horses," he told 'Mona. "That'll keep 'em for a while and give us a few minutes. They'll figure I'll try to hold 'em here."

'Mona let the horse pick its way up the rapidly ascending trail. Presently the cañon opened a little. Its walls fell back from a small, grassy valley containing two or three acres. The trail led up a ledge of rock jutting out from one of the sheer faces of cliff. Presently it dipped down behind some great boulders that had fallen from above some time in the ages that this great cleft had been in the making.

A voice hailed them. "That you, Homer?"

"Yep. The 'Paches are right on our heels, Steve."

Gurley let out a wailing oath. "Goddlemighty, man, why did you come here?"

"Driven in. They chased us ten miles. Better 'light, ma'am. We're liable to stay here quite a spell." Dinsmore unsaddled the horse and tied it to a shrub. "You're sure all in, Black Jack. Mebbe you'll never be the same bronc again. I've got this to say, old pal. I never straddled a better

hawss than you. That goes without copperin'." He patted its sweat-stained neck, fondled its nose for a moment, then turned briskly to the business in hand. "Get behind that p'int o' rocks, Steve. I'll cover the trail up. Girl, you'll find a kind of cave under that flat boulder. You get in there an' hunt cover."

'Mona did as she was told. Inside the cave were blankets, a saddle, the remains of an old campfire, and a piece of jerked venison hanging from a peg driven between two rocks. There were, too, a rifle leaning against the big boulder and a canvas bag containing ammunition.

The rifle was a '73. She busied herself loading it. Just as she finished there came to her the crack of Dinsmore's repeater.

The outlaw gave a little whoop of exultation.

"Tally one."

CHAPTER XXXIX

A CRY OUT OF THE NIGHT

NIGHT fell before the rescue party reached Palo Duro. The cañon was at that time a *terra incognita* to these cattlemen of the Panhandle. To attempt to explore it in the darkness would be to court disaster. The Apaches might trap the whole party.

But neither the Ranger nor Wadley could endure the thought of waiting till morning to push forward. The anxiety that weighed on them both could find relief only in action.

Jack made a proposal to Ramona's father. "We've got to throw off and camp here. No two ways about that. But I'm goin' to ride forward to Palo Duro an' see what I can find out. Want to go along?"

"Boy, I had in mind that very thing. We'll leave Jumbo in charge of the camp with orders to get started soon as he can see in the mo'nin'."

The two men rode into the darkness. They knew the general direction of Palo Duro and were both plainsmen enough to follow a straight course even in the blackest night. They traveled at a fast road gait, letting the horses pick their own way through the mesquite. Presently a star came out — and another. Banked clouds scudded across the sky in squadrons.

At last, below their feet, lay the great earth rift that made Palo Duro. It stretched before them an impenetrable black gulf of silence.

"No use trying to go down at random," said Jack, peering into its bottomless deeps. "Even if we did n't break our necks we'd get lost down there. My notion is for me to follow the bank in one direction an' for you to take the other. We might hear something."

"Sounds reasonable," agreed Wadley.

The cattleman turned to the left, the Ranger to the right. Roberts rode at a slow trot, stopping every few minutes to listen for any noise that might rise from the gulch.

His mind was full of pictures of the girl, one following another inconsequently. They stabbed him poignantly. He had a white dream of her moving down the street at Tascosa with step elastic, the sun sparkling in her soft, wavy hair. Another memory jumped to the fore of her on the stage, avoiding with shy distress the advances of the salesman he had jolted into his place. He saw her grave and gay, sweet and candid and sincere, but always just emerging with innocent radiance from the chrysalis of childhood.

Her presence was so near, she was so intimately close, that more than once he pulled up under an impression that she was calling him.

It was while he was waiting so, his weight resting easily in the saddle, that out of the night there

came to him a faint, far-away cry of dreadful agony. The sound of it shook Jack to the soul. Cold beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. Gooseflesh ran down his spine. His hand trembled. The heart inside his ribs was a heavy weight of ice. Though he had never heard it before, the Ranger knew that awful cry for the scream of a man in torment. The Apaches were torturing a captured prisoner.

If Dinsmore had been captured by them the chances were that 'Mona had been taken, too, unless he had given her the horse and remained to hold the savages back.

Roberts galloped wildly along the edge of the rift. Once again he heard that long-drawn wail of anguish and pulled up his horse to listen, the while he shook like a man with a heavy chill.

Before the sound of it had died away a shot echoed up the cañon to him. His heart seemed to give an answering lift of relief. Some one was still holding the Apaches at bay. He fired at once as a message that help was on the way.

His trained ear told him that the rifle had been fired scarcely a hundred yards below him, apparently from some ledge of the cliff well up from the bottom of the gulch. It might have come from the defenders or it might have been a shot fired by an Apache. Jack determined to find out.

He unfastened the *tientos* of his saddle which held the lariat. A scrub oak jutted up from the

edge of the cliff and to this he tied securely one end of the rope. Rifle in hand, he worked over the edge and lowered himself foot by foot. The rope spun round like a thing alive, bumped him against the rock wall, twisted in the other direction, and rubbed his face against the harsh stone. He had no assurance that the lariat would reach to the foot of the cliff, and as he went jerkily down, hand under hand, he knew that at any moment he might come to the end of it and be dashed against the boulders below.

His foot touched loose rubble, and he could see that the face of the precipice was rooted here in a slope that led down steeply to another wall. The ledge was like a roof pitched at an extremely acute angle. He had to get down on hands and knees to keep from sliding to the edge of the second precipice. At every movement he started small avalanches of stone and dirt. He crept forward with the utmost caution, dragging the rifle by his side.

A shot rang out scarcely fifty yards from him, fired from the same ledge upon which he was crawling.

Had that shot been fired by an Apache or by those whom he had come to aid?

CHAPTER XL

GURLEY'S GET-AWAY

THE boulder cave to which the Apaches had driven Dinsmore and Ramona had long since been picked out by the outlaws as a defensible position in case of need. The ledge that ran up to it on the right offered no cover for attackers. It was scarcely three feet wide, and above and below it the wall was for practical purposes perpendicular. In anticipation of a day when his gang might be rounded up by a posse, Pete Dinsmore had gone over the path and flung down into the gulch every bit of quartz big enough to shelter a man.

The contour of the rock face back of the big boulders was concave, so that the defenders were protected from sharpshooters at the edge of the precipice above.

Another way led up from the bed of the creek by means of a very rough and broken climb terminating in the loose rubble about the point where the ledge ran out. This Dinsmore had set Gurley to watch, but it was not likely that the Indians would reach here for several hours a point dangerous to the attacked.

Of what happened that day Ramona saw little. She loaded rifles and pushed them out to Dinsmore from the safety of the cave. Once he had

shouted out to her or to Gurley news of a second successful shot.

"One more good Indian. Hi-yi-yi!" The last was a taunt to the Apaches hidden below.

There came a time late in the afternoon when the serious attack of the redskins developed. It came from the left, and it was soon plain that a number of Apaches had found cover in the rough boulder bed halfway up from the creek. Ramona took Dinsmore's place as guard over the pathway while he moved across to help Gurley rout the sharpshooters slowly edging forward.

One hour of sharp work did it. Man for man there never was any comparison between the Indians and the early settlers as fighting men. Dinsmore and Gurley, both good shots, better armed and better trained than the Apaches, drove the bucks back from the boulder bed where they were deployed. One certainly was killed, another probably. As quickly as they could with safety disengage themselves the braves drew down into the shelter of the brush below.

But Dinsmore knew that the temporary victory achieved could not affect the end of this one-sided battle. The Apaches would wipe all three of them out — unless by some miracle help reached them from outside. Ramona, too, knew it. So did Gurley.

As the darkness fell the fingers of 'Mona crept often to the little revolver by her side. Sometime

soon — perhaps in three hours, perhaps in twelve, perhaps in twenty-four — she must send a bullet into her brain. She decided quite calmly that she would do it at the last possible moment that would admit of certainty. She must not make any mistake, must not wait till it was too late. It would be a horrible thing to do, but — she must not fall alive into the hands of the Apaches.

Crouched behind his boulder in the darkness, Gurley too knew that the party was facing extinction. He could not save the others by staying. Was it possible to save himself by going? He knew that rough climb down through the boulder beds to the cañon below. The night was black as Egypt. Surely it would be possible, if he kept well to the left, to dodge any sentries the Indians might have set.

He moistened his dry lips with his tongue. Furtively he glanced back toward the cave where the girl was hidden. She could not see him. Nor could Dinsmore. They would know nothing about it till long after he had gone. Their stupidity had brought the Apaches upon them. If they had taken his advice the savages would have missed them by ten miles. Why should he let their folly destroy him too? If he escaped he might meet some freight outfit and send help to them.

The man edged out from his rock, crept noiselessly into the night. He crawled along the steep

rubble slide, wary and soft-footed as a panther. It took him a long half-hour to reach the boulder bed. Rifle in hand, he lowered himself from rock to rock, taking advantage of every shadow. . . .

An hour later Dinsmore called to 'Mona. "Asleep, girl?"

"No," she answered in a small voice.

"Slip out with these cartridges to Steve and find out if anythin's doin'. Then you'd better try to sleep. 'Paches don't attack at night."

Ramona crept along the ledge back of the big boulders. Gurley had gone — vanished completely. Her heart stood still. There was some vague thought in her mind that the Indians had somehow disposed of him. She called to Dinsmore in a little stifled shout that brought him on the run.

"He's gone!" she gasped.

The eyes of Dinsmore blazed. He knew exactly how to account for the absence of the man. "I might 'a' known it. The yellow coyote! Left us in the lurch to save his own hide!"

"Perhaps he's gone for help," the girl suggested faintly.

"No chance. He 's playin' a lone hand — tryin' for a get-away himself," her companion said bitterly. "You'll have to take his place here. If you see anything move, no matter what it is, shoot at it."

"If I call you will you come?" she begged.

"On the jump," he promised. "Don't go to sleep. If they should come it will be up through the boulder bed. I'm leavin' you here because you can watch from cover where you can't possibly be seen. It 's different on the other side."

She knew that, but as soon as he had left her the heart of the girl sank. She was alone, lost in a night of howling savages. The horrible things they did to their captives — she recalled a story whispered to her by a girl friend that it had been impossible to shake out of her mind. In the middle of the night she had more than once found herself sitting bolt upright in bed, wakened from terrible dreams of herself as a prisoner of the Apaches.

'Mona prayed, and found some comfort in her prayers. They were the frank, selfish petitions of a little child.

"God, don't let me die. I'm so young, and so frightened. Send Daddy to save me . . . or Jack Roberts."

She recited the twenty-third Psalm aloud in a low voice. The fourth verse she went back to, repeating it several times.

"'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.'"

And the last verse:

"'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.'"

Somehow she felt less lonely afterward. God was on her side. He would send her father or Jack Roberts.

Then, into her newborn calm, there came a far cry of agony that shattered it instantly. Her taut nerves gave way like a broken bow-string. Her light body began to shake. She leaned against the cold rock wall in hysterical collapse.

The voice of Dinsmore boomed along the passageway. "It 's a cougar, girl. They've got a yell like the scream of lost souls. I've often heard it here."

Ramona knew he was lying, but the sound of his cheerful voice was something. She was not utterly alone.

Again that shriek lifted into the night and echoed up the cañon. The girl covered her ears with her hands and trembled violently. A shot rang out from the other end of the passage.

"Saw one of 'em movin' down below," the outlaw called to her.

But Ramona did not hear him. She had fainted.

CHAPTER XLI

HOMING HEARTS

JACK crept closer, very carefully. He was morally certain that the defenders held the ledge, but it would not do to make a mistake. Lives were at stake — one life much more precious than his own.

He drew his revolver and snaked forward. There was nothing else to do but take a chance. But he meant at least to minimize it, and certainly not to let himself be captured alive.

It was strange that nobody yet had challenged him. He was close enough now to peer into the darkness of the tunnel between the boulders and the wall. There seemed to be no one on guard.

He crept forward to the last boulder, and his boot pressed against something soft lying on the ground. It moved. A white, startled face was lifted to his — a face that held only the darkness of despair.

He knelt, put down his revolver, and slipped an arm around the warm young body.

"Thank God!" he cried softly. He was trembling in every limb. Tears filled his voice. And over and over again he murmured, "Thank God! . . . Thank God!"

The despair in the white face slowly dissolved.

He read there doubt, a growing certainty, and then a swift, soft radiance of joy and tears.

"I prayed for you, and you've come. God sent you to me. Oh, Jack, at last!"

Her arms crept round his neck. He held her close and kissed the sweet lips salt with tears of happiness.

He was ashamed of himself. Not since he had been a little boy had he cried till now. His life had made for stoicism. But tears furrowed down his lean, brown cheeks. The streak in him that was still tender-hearted child had suddenly come to the surface. For he had expected to find her dead at best; instead, her warm, soft body was in his arms, her eyes were telling him an unbelievable story that her tongue as yet could find no words to utter. There flamed in him, like fire in dead tumbleweeds, a surge of glad triumph that inexplicably blended with humble thankfulness.

To her his emotion was joy without complex. The Ranger was tough as a hickory withe. She knew him hard as tempered steel to those whom he opposed, and her heart throbbed with excitement at his tears. She alone among all women could have touched him so. It came to her like a revelation that she need never have feared. He was her destined mate. Across that wide desert space empty of life he had come straight to her as to a magnet.

And from that moment, all through the night,

she never once thought of being afraid. Her man was beside her. He would let no harm come to her. Womanlike, she exulted in him. He was so lithe and brown and slender, so strong and clean, and in all the world there was nothing that he feared.

With her hand in his she walked through the passage to where Dinsmore held watch. The outlaw turned and looked at the Ranger. If anybody had told him that a time would come when he would be glad to see Tex Roberts for any purpose except to fight him, the bandit would have had a swift, curt answer ready. But at sight of him his heart leaped. No hint of this showed in his leathery face.

"Earnin' that dollar a day, are you?" he jeered.

"A dollar a day an' grub," corrected Jack, smiling.

"Much of a posse with you?"

"Dropped in alone. My men are camped a few miles back. Mr. Wadley is with us."

"They got Gurley, I reckon. He tried to sneak away." Dinsmore flashed a quick look toward Ramona and back at Jack. "Leastways I'm not bettin' on his chances. Likely one of the 'Paches shot him."

"Mebbeso."

The girl said nothing. She knew that neither of the men believed Gurley had been shot. Those horrible cries that had come out of the night had

been wrung from him by past-masters in the business of torture.

"You 'd better get back an' hold the other end of the passage," suggested Dinsmore. He jerked his head toward 'Mona. "She 'll show you where."

Ramona sat beside her lover while he kept watch, her head against his shoulder, his arm around her waist. Beneath the stars that were beginning to prick through the sky they made their confessions of love to each other. She told him how she had tried to hate him because of her brother and could not, and he in turn told her how he had thought Arthur Ridley was her choice.

"I did think so once — before I knew you," she admitted, soft eyes veiled beneath long lashes. "Then that day you fought with the bull to save me: I began to love you then."

They talked most of the night away, but in the hours toward morning he made her lie down and rest. She protested that she could n't sleep; she would far rather sit beside him. But almost as soon as her head touched the saddle she was asleep.

A little before dawn he went to waken her. For a moment the soft loveliness of curved cheek and flowing lines touched him profoundly. The spell of her innocence moved him to reverence. She was still a child, and she was giving her life into his keeping.

The flush of sleep was still on her wrinkled cheek when she sat up at his touch.

"The Apaches are climbing up the boulder field," he explained. "I did n't want to waken you with a shot."

She stood before him in shy, sweet surrender, waiting for him to kiss her before he took his post. He did.

"It 's goin' to be all right," he promised her. "We'll drive 'em back an' soon yore father will be here with the men."

"I'm not afraid," she said — "not the least littlest bit. But you 're not to expose yourself."

"They can't hit a barn door — never can. But I'll take no chances," he promised.

During the night the Apaches had stolen far up the boulder bed and found cover behind quartz slabs which yielded them protection as good as that of the white man above. They took no chances, since there was plenty of time to get the imprisoned party without rushing the fort. Nobody knew they were here. Therefore nobody would come to their rescue. It was possible that they had food with them, but they could not have much water. In good time — it might be one sleep, perhaps two, possibly three — those on the ledge must surrender or die. So the Indians reasoned, and so the Ranger guessed that they would reason.

Jack lay behind his rocks as patiently as the

savages did. Every ten or fifteen minutes he fired a shot, not so much with the expectation of hitting one of the enemy as to notify his friends where he was. Above the cañon wall opposite the sun crept up and poured a golden light into the misty shadows of the gulch. Its shaft stole farther down the hillside till it touched the yellowing foliage of the cottonwoods.

Up the cañon came the sudden pop — pop — pop of exploding rifles. Drifted up yells and whoops. The Indians hidden in the rock slide began to appear, dodging swiftly down toward the trees. Jack let out the "Hi-yi-yi" of the line-rider and stepped out from the boulders to get a better shot. The naked Apaches, leaping like jack-rabbits, scurried for cover. Their retreat was cut off from the right, and they raced up the gorge to escape the galloping cowboys who swung round the bend. One of the red men, struck just as he was sliding from a flat rock, whirled, plunged down headfirst like a diver, and disappeared in the brush.

Jack waited to see no more. He turned and walked back into the cave where his incomparable sweetheart was standing with her little fingers clasped tightly together.

"It's all over. The 'Paches are on the run," he told her.

She drew a deep, long breath and trembled into his arms.

There Clint Wadley found her five minutes later. The cattleman brushed the young fellow aside and surrounded his little girl with rough tenderness. Jack waited to see no more, but joined Dinsmore outside.

After a long time Wadley, his arm still around Ramona, joined them on the ledge.

"Boys, I'm no hand at talkin'," he said huskily. "I owe both of you a damned sight more than I can ever pay. I'll talk with you later, Jack. What about you, Dinsmore? You're in one hell of a fix. I'll get you out of it or go broke."

"What fix am I in?" demanded the outlaw boldly. "They ain't got a thing on me — not a thing. Suspicions are n't proof."

The Ranger said nothing. He knew that the evidence he could give would hang Dinsmore before any Panhandle jury, and now his heart was wholly on the side of the ruffian who had saved the life of his sweetheart. None the less, it was his duty to take the man in charge and he meant to do it.

"Hope you can make yore side of the case stick, Dinsmore. I sure hope so. Anyway, from now on I'm with you at every turn of the road," the cattleman promised.

"Much obliged," answered the outlaw with a lift of his lip that might have been either a smile or a sneer.

"You've been trailin' with a bad outfit. You're

a sure-enough wolf, I've heard tell. But you're a man all the way, by gad."

"Did you figure I was yellow like Steve, Clint? Mebbe I'm a bad *hombre* all right. But you've known me twenty years. What license have you ever had to think I'd leave a kid like her for the 'Paches to play with?" The hard eyes of the outlaw challenged a refutation of his claim.

"None in the world, Homer. You're game. Nobody ever denied you guts. An' you're a better man than I thought you were."

Dinsmore splattered the face of a rock with tobacco juice and his stained teeth showed in a sardonic grin.

"I've got a white black heart," he jeered.

CHAPTER XLII

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

RESCUED and rescuers rode out of the cañon as soon as the Apaches had been driven away. Nobody suggested that the Indians who had been killed in the surprise attack be buried. The bodies were left lying where they had fallen. For in those days no frontiersman ever buried a dead redskin. If the body happened to be inconveniently near a house, a mounted cowboy roped one foot and dragged it to a distance. Those were the years when all settlers agreed that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. The Indian wars are over now, and a new generation can safely hold a more humane view; but old-timers in the Panhandle will tell you to-day that the saying was literally true.

The little group of riders drew out of the gorge and climbed the shale slide to the plain above. Roberts rode knee to knee with Dinsmore. On the other side of the outlaw was Jumbo. The man between them still carried his rifle and his revolver, but he understood without being told that he was a prisoner.

Wadley dropped back from his place beside Ramona and ranged up beside the officer.

"What are you aimin' to do with him, Jack?" he asked in a low voice.

"I'm goin' to turn him over to Cap Ellison."

The cattleman pondered that awhile before he continued. "'Mona has been tellin' me about you an' her, Jack. I ain't got a word to say — not a word. If you're the man she wants, you're sure the man she'll get. But I want to tell you that you're a lucky young scamp. You don't deserve her. I've got to see the man yet that does."

"We're not goin' to quarrel about that, Mr. Wadley," agreed Jack. "I'm nothin' but a rough cowboy, an' she's the salt of the earth. I don't see what she sees in me."

"H'm!" grunted the owner of the A T O, and looked at the lithe, brown, young fellow, supple as a whip and strong as tested steel. It was not hard to understand what a girl saw in him. "Glad you got sense enough to know that."

"I'm not a plumb fool, you know."

Clint changed the subject apparently. "Boy, I've been in hell ever since Sullivan rode in with the bad news. My God! how I suffered till I saw my little trick standing there alive and well."

The Ranger nodded. He thought he knew what Wadley was driving toward. But he was resolved to give him no help. He must make his own plea.

"You helped save her, Jack. That's all right. I reckon you care for her too. Any man would 'a' done what you did. But Dinsmore, he did a whole lot more 'n you. When he was hot-

footing it to escape from you, he turned round an' started to bring her back to the ranch. Steve Gurley, he said to take 'Mona along with 'em to the cañon. You know what that hellhound meant. But Dinsmore would n't stand for that. He said she was entitled to be took home. Well, you know how the 'Paches cut 'em off."

"Yes. That 's how we figured it out," said Roberts.

"Her hawss stepped into a prairie-dog hole an' broke its leg. Dinsmore stopped an' swung her up behind him, the 'Paches gainin' every jump of the road. Oncet they reached Palo Duro he stood off the devils till she reached the ledge. Jack, we're lucky that a man like Homer Dinsmore was beside her yesterday, don't you reckon?"

"I reckon." Tiny beads of sweat stood on the forehead of the boy. He knew now what was coming.

"Good enough. Well, Jack, I reckon we cayn't take Dinsmore in to be hanged. That would n't be human, would it?"

The roof of the Ranger's mouth was dry. He looked away across the rolling waves of prairie while the cattleman waited for his answer. Every impulse of desire in him leaned toward the argument Wadley was making. His love for Ramona, his gratitude to Dinsmore, his keen desire to meet halfway the man who was to be his

father-in-law and had accepted the prospect so generously, his boyish admiration for the thing that the outlaw had done, all tugged mightily at him.

"An' look a-here," went on the cattleman, "you got to keep in mind that you never would 'a' got Dinsmore this trip in kingdom come if he had n't stopped to save 'Mona. He'd 'a' kep' right up the cañon till he was sure enough lost. It would be a damned mean trick for you to take a man in to be hanged because he had risked his life to save the girl you claim to love."

"You make me feel like a yellow hound, Mr. Wadley," admitted Roberts. "But what am I to do? When I joined the Rangers I swore to enforce the law. You know how it is in the force. We've got no friends when we're sent out to get a man. I'd bring in my own brother if he was wanted. That's why the Texas Rangers stack up so high. They play no favorites an' they let no prisoners escape. You're askin' me to throw down Cap Ellison who trusts me, the State that pays me, the boys on the force that pal with me, an' my loyalty to the people. You want me to do it because I've got a personal reason to wish Dinsmore to get away. If I don't take him in to town I'm a traitor. That's the long an' the short of it."

"Hell's blazes!" broke in the cattleman. "I thought you was a man an' not a machine. You

want to marry my li'l' girl, but you're not willin' to do a favor to the man who has just saved her from a hundred horrible deaths. Have n't you any guts in you a-tall?"

The muscles stood out on the lean, set face of the Ranger like rawhide ropes. "I can't lie down on my job. Ramona would n't ask it of me. I've got to go through. That 's what I'm paid for."

"She 's askin' it right now. Through me."

"Then she does n't understand what she 's askin'. Let me talk with her. Let me explain —"

"We don't want any of yore damned explanations," interrupted Wadley roughly. "Talk turkey. Will you or won't you? Me, I ain't plumb crazy about law. It 's justice I want done. I'll be doggoned if I'm goin' to stand by an' let any harm come to Dinsmore — not this here year of our Lord."

"I'll do all I can for him —"

"Except that you're bound an' determined to see him hanged. You sure beat my time. I'd think you would be right anxious to tell him to cut his stick — kinda slide out inconspicuous when we ain't watchin'. Be reasonable, Roberts. That 's all I ask. I want to be yore friend if you 'll let me. My bank 's behind you to back any business proposition you want to start. Or that job I offered you before is open to you. After a little we can fix up some kind of a partnership."

The dark color burned under the tan of the

Ranger's face. His lips were like a steel trap, and in his eyes there was a cold glitter. "It does n't get you anywhere to talk thataway to me, Mr. Wadley. I'd want to marry Miss Ramona just the same if she was the poorest girl in the Panhandle. Offer me a deed to the A T O an' it would n't make any difference to me. I'm not goin' to turn Dinsmore loose because it 's to my advantage."

"Don't get on the prod, young fellow. I was n t tryin' to bribe you. I was showin' you how I felt. But you 're so damned high-headed a plain man can't talk sense to you." The impulsive anger of the old Texan suddenly ripped out. "Hell, I'm not goin' to beg you to do what yore own decency ought to tell you right away. But I'll say this right off the reel: neither 'Mona nor I want to have a thing to do with a man who 's so selfish he can't yield the first favor she ever asked of him. We 're through with you."

The two men had fallen back of the others and were riding alone. Now the young Texan looked hard at the old-timer. The eyes of neither of them gave way even for a beat of the lashes.

"I'll have to hear Miss Ramona say that before it goes with me," answered Roberts steadily.

"All right. You can hear it right this minute." The cattleman touched his horse with the spur and cantered forward.

The Ranger was with him when they drew up beside Ramona. The smile in the eyes of the girl died away as she looked first at one and then at the other of them. She was sensitive to atmospheres, and if she had not been the harsh surface of both of them would have been evidence enough of a clash.

"Ramona," began her father, "this fellow here is a Ranger first an' a human bein' afterward. He 's hell-bent on takin' Dinsmore to prison so as to make a big name for himself. I've told him how we feel, an' he says that does n't make any difference a-tall, that Dinsmore 's got to hang."

"That is n't what I meant a-tall," explained Jack. "I've been tryin' to tell yore father that I'd give an arm to turn him loose. But I can't. It would n't be right."

The soft eyes of the girl pleaded with her lover. "I think we ought to free him, Jack. He saved my life. He fought for me. Nobody could have done more for me. He . . . he was so good to me." Her voice broke on the last sentence.

The young man swallowed a lump in his throat. "I wish I could. But don't you see I can't? I'm not Jack Roberts, the man who . . . who cares for you. I'm an officer of the State sent out to bring in this man wanted for a crime. I've *got* to take him in."

"But he saved my life," she said gently, puzzled at his queer point of view. "He stayed with

me when he could easily have escaped. You would n't . . . take advantage of that, Jack?"

"I'll give every dollar I've got in the world to clear him, 'Mona. I'll fight for him to a finish. But I've got to take him to town an' put him in jail. If I don't I can't ever hold up my head again," he told her desperately.

"I thought you loved me, Jack," she murmured, through gathering tears.

"What kind of a man would I be for you to marry if I threw down on what was right just because you asked me to an' I wanted to do it?" he demanded.

"He's got his neck bowed, 'Mona. I told him how we felt, but he would n't believe me. I reckon he knows now," her father said.

"You're not goin' to throw me over because I've got to do what I think right, 'Mona?" asked Jack miserably.

"I . . . I'm not throwing you over. It's you. You're throwing *me* over. Don't you see that we've *got* to help Mr. Dinsmore because he did so much for me?"

"Certainly I see that. I'll resign from the Rangers, and then we'll all pull together for him, 'Mona."

"After you've pulled on the rope that hangs him," added Clint angrily. "Nothin' to that, 'Mona. He's for us or he's against us. Let him say which right now."

The girl nodded, white to the lips.

"Do you mean that you'll give me up unless I let Dinsmore escape before we reach town?" asked the young man.

"I . . . . I've got to save him as he did me. If you won't help, it 's because you don't love me enough," she faltered.

"I can't," the boy cried.

"'Nough said," cut in Wadley. "You've got yore answer, 'Mona, an' he 's got his."

Jack stiffened in the saddle. His hard eyes bored straight into those of his sweetheart. "Have I?" he asked of her.

The girl nodded and turned her head away with a weak, little gesture of despair. Her heart was bleeding woe.

The Ranger wheeled on his horse and galloped back to his place beside Dinsmore.

CHAPTER XLIII

TEX RESIGNS

JACK ROBERTS, spurs jingling, walked into the office of his chief.

Ellison looked up, leaned back in his chair, and tugged at his goatee. "Well, Tex, you sure were thorough. Four men in the Dinsmore outfit, an' inside o' two days three of 'em dead an' the fourth a prisoner. You hit quite a gait, son."

"I've come to resign," announced the younger man.

"Well, I kinda thought you'd be resignin' about now," said the Captain with a smile. "Weddin' bells liable to ring right soon, I reckon."

"Not mine," replied Roberts.

Somehow, in the way he said it, the older man knew that the subject had been closed.

"Goin' to take that job Clint offered you?"

"No." Jack snapped out the negative curtly, explosively.

Another topic closed.

"Just quittin'. No reasons to offer, son?"

"Reasons a-plenty. I've had man-huntin' enough to last me a lifetime. I'm goin' to try law-breakin' awhile for a change."

"Meanin'?"

"You can guess what I mean, Captain, an' if

you're lucky you'll guess right. Point is, I'm leavin' the force to-day."

"Kinda sudden, ain't it, Tex?"

"At six o'clock to-night. Make a note of the time, Captain. After that I'm playin' my own hand. Understand?"

"I understand you're sore as a thumb with a bone felon. Take yore time, son. Don't go off half-cocked." The little Captain rose and put his hand on the shoulder of the boy. "I reckon things have got in a sort of kink for you. Give 'em time to unravel, Tex."

The eyes of the Ranger softened. "I've got nothin' against you, Captain. You're all there. We won't go into any whyfors, but just let it go as it stands. I want to quit my job — right away. This round-up of the Dinsmores about cleans the Panhandle anyhow."

"You're the doctor, Tex. But why not take yore time? It costs nothin' Mex to wait a day or two an' look around you first."

"I've got business — to-night. I'd rather quit when I said."

"What business?" asked Ellison bluntly. "You mentioned lawbreakin'. Aimin' to shoot up the town, are you?"

"At six to-night, Captain, my resignation takes effect."

The little man shrugged. "I hear you, Jack. You go off the pay-roll at six. I can feel it in my

bones that you're goin' to pull off some fool business. Don't run on the rope too far, Jack. Everybody that breaks the law looks alike to my boys, son."

"I'll remember."

"Good luck to you." Ellison offered his hand.

Roberts wrung it. "Same to you, Cap. So long."

The young man walked downtown, ate his dinner at the hotel, and from there strolled down to the largest general store in town. Here he bought supplies enough to last for a week — flour, bacon, salt, sugar, tobacco, and shells for rifle and revolvers. These he carried to his room, where he lay down on the bed and read a month-old Trinidad paper.

Presently the paper sagged. He began to nod, fell asleep. When he opened his eyes again it was late in the afternoon. His watch told him that it was just six o'clock.

He got up, took off the buckskin suit that had served him for a uniform, and donned once more the jeans and chaps he had worn as a line-rider.

"Good-bye, Mr. Ranger," he told himself. "I reckon you can't have much worse luck as a citizen than as an officer."

He buckled round his waist the belt that held his revolvers, and from the corner of the room where it stood took his rifle. Carrying the supplies he had that afternoon bought, he directed his steps to the Elephant Corral and saddled his

horse. With motions of deft economy he packed the provisions for travel, then swung to the saddle and cantered down the street.

At the post-office corner he swung to the left for a block and dismounted in front of a rather large dugout.

A wrinkled little man with a puzzled, lost-puppy look on his face sat on a bench in front mending a set of broken harness.

"'Lo, Tex. How they comin'?" he asked.

"'Lo, Yorky. Hope I see you well," drawled the horseman, a whimsical twitch of humor at the corner of his mouth. He was swinging his lariat carelessly as cowboys do.

"Jes' tol'able. I got a misery in my left shoulder I'm a-goin' to try some yerbs I done had recommended." Yorky was the kind of simple soul who always told you just how he was when you asked him.

Roberts passed him and led the way into the house. "Come inside, Yorky, I want to talk with you," he said.

The room into which the cowboy had passed was a harness shop. It was littered with saddles and bridles and broken bits of traces. A workman's bench and tools were in one corner of the shop. A door, bolted and padlocked, led to a rear room.

Jack put down his rifle and his belt on a shelf and sat down on the bench.

"Yore prisoner's in there all right," said the saddler with a jerk of his thumb over his left shoulder.

Since no one else in town would take the place, Yorky had been unanimously chosen jailer. He did not like the job, but it gave him an official importance that flattered his vanity.

"He's not my prisoner any more, Yorky. He's yours. I quit being a Ranger just twenty-five minutes ago."

"You don't say! Well, I reckon you done wise. A likely young fellow —"

"Where's yore six-shooter?" demanded Jack.

Yorky was a trifle surprised. "You're sittin' on it," he said, indicating the work bench.

Roberts got up and stood aside. "Get it."

The lank jaw of the jailer hung dolefully. He rubbed its bristles with a hand very unsure of itself.

"Now, you look a-hyer, Tex. I'm jailer, I am. I don't allow to go with you to bring in no bad-man. Nothin' of that sort. It ain't in the contract."

"I'm not askin' it. Get yore gat."

The little saddler got it, though with evident misgivings.

The brown, lean young man reseated himself on the bench. "I've come here to get yore prisoner," he explained.

"Sure," brightened the jailer. "Wait till I get

my keys." He put the revolver down on the table and moved toward the nail on which hung two large keys.

"I'm just through tellin' you that I'm no longer a Ranger, but only a private citizen."

Yorky was perplexed. He felt he was not getting the drift of this conversation. "Well, an' I done said, fine, a young up 'n' comin' fellow like you —"

"You've got no business to turn yore prisoner over to me, Yorky. I'm not an officer."

"Oh, tha's all right. Anything you say, Tex."

"I'm goin' to give him my horse an' my guns an' tell him to hit the trail."

The puzzled lost-dog look was uppermost on the wrinkled little face just now. Yorky was clearly out of his depth. But of course Jack Roberts, the best Ranger in the Panhandle, must know what he was about.

"Suits me if it does you, Tex," the saddler chirped.

"No, sir. You've got to make a fight to hold Dinsmore. He 's wanted for murder an' attempted robbery. You're here to see he does n't get away."

"Make a fight! You mean . . . fight you?"

"That 's just what I mean. I'm out of reach of my gats. Unhook yore gun if I make a move toward you."

Yorky scratched his bewildered head. This

certainly did beat the Dutch. He looked helplessly at this brown, lithe youth with the well-packed muscles.

"I'll be doggoned if I know what 's eatin' you, Tex. I ain't a-goin' to fight you none a-tall."

"You bet you are! I've warned you because I don't want to take advantage of you, since I've always had the run of the place. But you're jailer here. You've *got* to fight — or have everybody in town say you're yellow."

A dull red burned into the cheeks of the little man. "I don't aim for to let no man say that, Tex."

"That's the way to talk, Yorky. I've got no more right to take Dinsmore away than any other man." Jack was playing with his lariat. He had made a small loop at one end and with it was swinging graceful ellipses in the air. "Don't you let me do it."

Yorky was nervous, but decided. "I ain't a-goin' to," he said, and the revolver came to a businesslike position, its nose pointed straight for Roberts.

The gyrations of the rope became more active and the figures it formed more complex.

"Quit yore foolin', Tex, an' get down to cases. Dad-gum yore hide, a fellow never can tell what you honest-to-God mean."

The rope snaked forward over the revolver and settled on the wrist of the jailer. It tight-

ened, quicker than the eye could follow. Jack jerked the lariat sideways and plunged forward. A bullet crashed into the wall of the dugout.

The cowboy's shoulder pinned the little man against the bolted door. One hand gave a quick wrench to the wrist of the right arm and the revolver clattered to the puncheon floor. The two hands of the jailer, under pressure, came together. Round them the rope wound swiftly.

"I've got you, Yorky. No use strugglin'. I don't want to start that misery in yore shoulder," warned Jack.

The little saddler, tears of mortification in his eyes, relaxed from his useless efforts. Jack had no intention of humiliating him and he proceeded casually to restore his self-respect.

"You made a good fight, Yorky, — a blamed good fight. I won out by a trick, or I never could 'a' done it. Listen, old-timer. I plumb had to play this low-down trick on you. Homer Dinsmore saved Miss Wadley from the 'Paches. He treated her like a white man an' risked his life for her. She 's my friend. Do you reckon I'd ought to let him hang?"

"Why n't you tell me all that?" complained the man-handled jailer.

"Because you're such a tender-hearted old geezer, Yorky. Like as not you would 'a' thrown open the door an' told me to take him. You had to make a fight to keep him so they could n't say

you were in cahoots with me. I'm goin' to jail for this an' I don't want comp'ny."

Jack trussed up his friend comfortably with the slack of the rope so that he could move neither hands nor feet.

From the nail upon which the two keys hung the jail-breaker selected one. He shot back the bolts of the inner door and turned the key.

CHAPTER XLIV

DINSMORE GIVES INFORMATION

THE inner room was dark, and for a moment Jack stood blinking while his eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom.

A voice growled a question at him. "What do you want now, Mr. Grandstander?"

"I want you."

"What for?"

"You'll find out presently. Come along."

For a moment Dinsmore did not move. Then he slouched forward. He noticed that the Ranger was not armed. Another surprise met him when he stepped into the outer room. The jailer lay on the floor bound.

The outlaw looked quickly at Roberts, a question in his eyes. Jack unlocked his handcuffs. They had been left on him because the jail was so flimsy.

"My rifle an' six-shooters are on the shelf there, Dinsmore. A horse packed with grub is waitin' outside for you. Make for the short-grass country an' cross the line about Deaf Smith County to the Staked Plains. I reckon you'll find friends on the Pecos."

"Yes?" asked Dinsmore, halfway between insolence and incredulity.

"That 's my advice. You don't need to take it if you don't want to."

"Oh, it listens good to me. I'll take it all right, Mr. Ranger. There are parties in Mexico that can use me right now at a big figure. The Lincoln County War is still goin' good." The bad-man challenged Roberts with bold eyes. "But what I'm wonderin' is how much Clint Wadley paid you to throw down Cap Ellison."

The anger burned in Jack's face. "Damn you, Dinsmore, I might 'a' known you'd think somethin' like that. I'll tell you this. I quit bein' a Ranger at six o'clock this evenin', an' I have n't seen or heard from Wadley since I quarreled with him about you."

"So you 're turnin' me loose because you 're so fond of me. Is that it?" sneered the outlaw.

"I'll tell you just why I'm turnin' you loose, Dinsmore. It 's because for twenty-four hours in yore rotten life you were a white man. When I was sleepin' on yore trail you turned to take Miss Wadley back to the A T O. When the 'Paches were burnin' the wind after you an' her, you turned to pick her up after she had fallen. When you might have lit out up the cañon an' left her alone, you stayed to almost certain death. You were there all the time to a fare-you-well. From that one good day that may take you to heaven yet, I dragged you in here with a rope around yore neck. I had to do it, because I was a Ranger. But

Wadley was right when he said it was n't *human*. I'm a private citizen now, an' I'm makin' that wrong right."

"You'd ought to go to Congress. You got the gift," said Dinsmore with dry irony. Five minutes earlier he had been, as Roberts said, a man with a rope around his neck. Now he was free, the wide plains before him over which to roam. He was touched, felt even a sneaking gratitude to this young fellow who was laying up trouble for himself on his account; and he was ashamed of his own emotion.

"I'll go to jail; that 's where I'll go," answered Jack grimly. "But that 's not the point."

"I'll say one thing, Roberts. I did n't kill Hank. One of the other boys did. It can't do him any harm to say so now," muttered Dinsmore awkwardly.

"I know. Overstreet shot him."

"That was just luck. It might have been me."

Jack looked straight and hard at him. "Will you answer me one question? Who killed Rutherford Wadley?"

"Why should I?" demanded the bad-man, his eyes as hard and steady as those of the other man.

"Because an innocent man is under a cloud. You know Tony did n't kill him. He 's just been married. Come clean, Dinsmore."

"As a favor to you, because of what you're doin' for me?"

"I'm not doin' this for you, but to satisfy myself. But if you want to put it that way —"

"Steve Gurley shot Ford because he could n't be trusted. The kid talked about betrayin' us to Ellison. If Steve had n't shot him I would have done it."

"But not in the back," said Jack.

"No need o' that. I could 'a' gunned him any time in a fair fight. We followed him, an' before I could stop him Gurley fired."

The line-rider turned to the jailer. "You heard what he said, Yorky."

"I ain't deef," replied the little saddler with sulky dignity. His shoulder was aching and he felt very much outraged.

"Ford Wadley was a bad egg if you want to know. He deserved just what he got," Dinsmore added.

"I don't care to hear about that. Yore horse is waitin', Dinsmore. Some one might come along an' ask inconvenient whyfors. Better be movin' along."

Dinsmore buckled the belt round his waist and picked up the rifle.

"Happy days," he said, nodding toward Jack, then turned and slouched out of the door.

A moment, and there came the swift clatter of hoofs.

CHAPTER XLV

RAMONA DESERTS HER FATHER

ARTHUR RIDLEY, seated on the porch between Clint Wadley and Ramona, was annoying one and making himself popular with the other. For he was maintaining, very quietly but very steadily, that Jack Roberts had been wholly right in refusing to release Dinsmore.

"Just as soon as you lads get to be Rangers you go crazy with the heat," said the cattleman irritably. "Me, I don't go down on my ham bones for the letter of the law. Justice! That's what I aim for to do. I don't say you boys have n't got a right to sleep on Dinsmore's trail till you get him. That's yore duty. But out here in Texas we'd ought to do things high, wide, an' handsome. Roberts, by my way of it, should have shook Homer's hand. 'Fine! You saved 'Mona's life. Light a shuck into a chaparral *pronto*. In twelve hours I'm goin' to hit the trail after you again.' That's what he had ought to have said."

"You're asking him to be generous at the expense of the State, Mr. Wadley. Jack could n't do that. Dinsmore's liberty was n't a gift of his to give. He was hired by the State — sent out to bring in that particular man. He had n't any choice but to do it," insisted Arthur.

Ramona sat in the shadow of the honeysuckle vines. She did not say anything and Ridley could not see her face well. He did not know how grateful she was for his championship of his friend. She knew he was right and her heart throbbed gladly because of it. She wanted to feel that she and her father were wrong and had done an injustice to the man she loved.

Captain Ellison came down the walk, his spurs jingling. In spite of his years the little officer carried himself jauntily, his wide hat tilted at a rakish angle. Just now he was worried.

As soon as he knew the subject of conversation, he plunged in, a hot partisan, eager for battle. Inside of two minutes he and Wadley were engaged in one of their periodical semi-quarrels.

"You're wrong, Clint," the Captain announced dogmatically. "You're wrong, like you 'most always are. You're that bullheaded you cayn't see it. But I'm surprised at you, 'Mona. If Jack had been a private citizen, you would n't needed to ask him to turn loose Dinsmore. But he was n't. That's the stuff my Rangers are made of. They play the hand out. The boy did just right."

"That's what you say, Jim. You drill these boys of yours till they ain't hardly human. I'm for law an' order. You know that. But I don't go out of my head about them the way you do. 'Mona an' I have got some sense. We're reasonable human bein's." To demonstrate his posses-

sion of this last quality Clint brought his fist down on the arm of the chair so hard that it cracked.

From out of the darkness Ramona made her contribution in a voice not quite steady.

"We're wrong, Dad. We've been wrong all the time. I did n't see it just at first, and then I did n't want to admit it even to myself. But I'm glad now we are." She turned to Captain Ellison a little tremulously. "Will you tell him, Uncle Jim, that I want to see him?"

"You're a little gentleman, 'Mona. I always said you were." The Captain reached out and pressed her hand. "I'll tell him when I see him. No tellin' when that'll be. Jack resigned to-day. He's got some fool notion in his head. I'm kinda worried about him."

The girl's heart fluttered. "Worried? What . . . what do you think he's going to do?"

The Captain shook his head. "Cayn't tell you, because I don't know. But he's up to somethin'. He acted kinda hard an' bitter."

A barefooted negro boy called in from the gate. "Cap'n Ellison there, sah?"

He brought a note in and handed it to the officer of Rangers. The Captain ripped open the envelope and handed the sheet inside to Ramona.

"Run along in an' read it for me, honey. It's too dark to see here."

The girl ran into the house and lit a lamp.

The color washed out of her face as she read the note.

Come up to the hotel and arrest me, Captain. I held up Yorky, took his keys, and freed Dinsmore.

JACK ROBERTS

Then, in jubilant waves, the blood beat back into her arteries. That was why he had resigned, to pay the debt he owed Homer Dinsmore on her account. He had put himself within reach of the law for her sake. Her heart went out to him in a rush. She must see him. She must see him at once.

From the parlor she called to Captain Ellison. "You'd better come in and read the note yourself, Uncle Jim. It's important."

It was so important to her that before the Captain of Rangers was inside the house, she was out the back door running toward the hotel as fast as her lithe limbs could carry her. She wanted to see Jack before his chief did, to ask his forgiveness for having failed him at the first call that came upon her faith.

She caught up with the colored boy as he went whistling up the road. The little fellow took a message for her into the hotel while she waited in the darkness beside the post-office. To her there presently came Roberts. He hesitated a moment in front of the store and peered into the shadows. She had not sent her name, and it was possible that enemies had decoyed him there.

"Jack," she called in a voice that was almost a whisper.

In half a dozen long strides he was beside her. She wasted no time in preliminaries.

"We were wrong, Dad and I. I told Uncle Jim to tell you to come to me . . . and then your note to him came. Jack, do you . . . still like me?"

He answered her as lovers have from the beginning of time — with kisses, with little joyous exclamations, with eyes that told more than words. He took her into his arms hungrily in an embrace of fire and passion. She wept happily, and he wiped away her tears.

They forgot time in eternity, till Ellison brought them back to earth. He was returning from the hotel with Wadley, and as he passed they heard him sputtering.

"Why did he send for me, then, if he meant to light out? What in Sam Hill — ?"

Jack discovered himself to the Captain, and incidentally his sweetheart.

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" exclaimed Ellison. "You youngsters sure beat my time. How did you get here, 'Mona?"

Clint made prompt apologies. "I was wrong, boy. I'd ought to know it by this time, for they've all been dinnin' it at me. Shake, an' let's make a new start."

In words it was not much, but Jack knew by the way he said it that the cattleman meant a

good deal more than he said. He shook hands gladly.

"Looks to me like Jack would make that new start in jail," snapped the Captain. "I don't expect he can go around jail-breaking with my prisoners an' get away with it."

"I'll go to jail with him, then," cried 'Mona quickly.

"H'mp!" The Ranger Captain softened. "It would n't be a prison if you were there, honey."

Jack slipped his hand over hers in the semi-darkness. "You're whistlin', Captain."

"I reckon you 'n' me will take a trip down to Austin to see the Governor, Jim," Wadley said. "Don't you worry any about that prison, 'Mona."

The girl looked up into the eyes of her lover. "We're not worrying any, Dad," she answered, smiling.

CHAPTER XLVI

LOOSE THREADS

THE Governor had been himself a cattleman. Before that he had known Ellison and Wadley during the war. Therefore he lent a friendly ear to the tale told him by his old-time friends.

Clint did most of the talking, one leg thrown across the arm of a leather-bound chair in the library of the Governor's house. The three men were smoking. A mint julep was in front of each.

The story of Jack Roberts lost nothing in the telling. Both of the Panhandle men were now partisans of his, and when the owner of the A T O missed a point the hawk-eyed little Captain was there to stress it.

"That's all right, boys," the Governor at last broke in. "I don't doubt he's all you say he is, but I don't see that I can do anything for him. If he's in trouble because he deliberately helped a murderer to escape —"

"You don't need to do a thing, Bob," interrupted Wadley. "That's just the point. He's in no trouble unless you make it for him. All you've got to do is shut yore eyes. I spent three hours with a pick makin' a hole in the jail wall so as it would look like the prisoner escaped. I did a real thorough job. Yorky, the jailer, won't talk. We

got that all fixed. There'll be no trouble a-tall unless you want the case against Jack pushed."

"What was the use of comin' to me at all, then? Why did n't you boys keep this under your hats?" the Governor asked.

Wadley grinned. "Because of Jim's conscience. You see, Bob, he fills his boys up with talk about how the Texas Rangers are the best police force in the world. That morale stuff! Go through an' do yore duty. Play no favorites an' have no friends when you're on the trail of a criminal. Well, he cayn't ignore what young Roberts has done. So he passes the buck to you."

The Governor nodded appreciation of Ellison's difficulty. "All right, Jim. You've done your duty in reporting it. Now I'll forget all about it. You boys go home and marry those young people soon as they're ready."

The Panhandle cattleman gave a whoop. "That'll be soon as I can draw up partnership papers for me 'n' Jack as a weddin' present for him an' Mona."

They were married at Clarendon. All the important people of the Panhandle attended the wedding, and it was generally agreed that no better-looking couple ever faced the firing line of a marriage ceremony.

There was a difference of opinion as to whether the ex-line-rider deserved his good luck. Jumbo

Wilkins was one of those who argued mightily that there was no luck about it.

"That doggoned Tex wore his bronc to a shadow waitin' on Miss 'Mona an' rescuin' her from trouble. She plumb had to marry him to git rid of him," he explained. "I never saw the beat of that boy's gall. Six months ago he was ridin' the line with me. Now he's the *segundo* of the whole outfit an' has married the daughter of the boss to boot."

Jumbo was on hand with a sack of rice and an old shoe when the bride and groom climbed into the buckboard to drive to the ranch. His admiration found vent in one last shout as the horses broke into a run:

"Oh, you Tex! Let 'em go, son!"

THE END

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